

Dirty Laundry
By: Artemyss-s

Fandom: voltron: legendary defender

Summary: When Lance says he needs to bring a boy home, all of his fellow collage friends, are busy and can't attend. All but 1, Keith. What just goes from a simple relationship, turns into a full on relationship. (Made with FULL permission!)

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1. Chapter 1

Dirty Laundry

Day 0

Group Chat: Lance is kinkier than Shiro

Members: Firelord, choke Me Daddy, President Taquito, Pidgeon, Hunky Munky, princess fukboi killer

2:14 P.M.

President Taquito (Lance Sanchez) Said:

guY S GUYS I NEED YOUR HE LP

2:19 P.M.

Pidgeon (Pidge Holt) Said:

what

2:19 P.M.

President Taquito (Lance Sanchez) Said:

I need maJOR fhelp and i don't know what to do

2:20 P.M.

Firelord (Keith Gyeong) Said:

Jesus christ spit it out

2:21 P.M.

President Taquito (Lance Sanchez) Said:

SHIT MY PHONE IS ABOUT TO DIE QUICK WHERE ARE YOU I'LL COME FIND YOU

2:22 P.M.

Firelord (Keith Gyeong) Said:

Library 2nd floor

Keith shut his phone off and slid against the back of his cushioned chair, obviously irritated. "Lance is heading over."

Shiro looked up from his laptop, fingers halting from their place at the keyboard.

"To study? Or is he coming to watch Naruto like last time?"

Keith cringed at the thought. He despised Naruto more than any other ridiculous anime

Lance wasted his time on. Keith couldn't even remember the amount of times Lance had ushered him into watching his cartoons, usually with Japanese subtitles and excessive amounts of screaming.

"He needs help or something." Keith gave all the information he knew and shrugged.

Pidge audibly groaned, visibly sulking their entire body away from their laptop screen. "I bet he forgot his school ID again. He keeps making me search it up on the school mainframe."

"Isn't that, I don't know, illegal?"

The smirk on Pidge's face was devilish. "Only if you get caught."

"Anyway—" Keith changed the subject. "He's being annoyingly vague on the issue."

It wasn't until a few minutes later that the sound of Lance's cries echoed from the other side of the library. Keith watched as a hysterical Lance came sprinting from behind the corner of a bookshelf, nearly pinning a girl and a librarian in the process. Keith chuckled when the librarian almost killed Lance, the older woman scolding him with a pointed finger.

The moment the librarian was out of sight Lance made his quick escape to their side. Announcing at a volume much louder than library appropriate, Lance slammed his palms on the table and cried; "I have a predicament!"

"What's up?" Shiro asked, unphased by the papers and books that had fallen from the table's sudden movement.

"What's up? WHAT'S UP? I'll tell you what's fucking up."

Keith groaned outwardly, slamming his own laptop shut. "If you say the sky I swear to fucking god-"

"No!" Lance flung himself into the fourth chair. "Well, actually yes, but that's not what's up! What's up is my Abuela! She's coming to my parent's house for christmas!"

Keith gave the boy a deadpan stare. "So? It's just your grandma. You love her and stuff. Right?"

"Of course I do!" Lance flung his hands into the air. "That's what makes my problem even worse!"

"I'm confused."

Lance leaned forward into the table, pressing up against the wood with his palms. "Here's the dealio. So I'm bisexual-"

"We know. You won't shut up about it."

"-And you know how I came out my sophomore year of high school? Well, my family was super 'ew' at first but now they don't give a shit."

"How does this have anything to do with your grandma?"

Lance pushed a finger against Keith's lips to shush him. "I'm not done yet! See, after a while my family and extended family were all like, 'It's okay if you like dick, Lance! Date whoever you want!' But my Abuela? She's super against it. Extremely so."

"That you like dick?"

"Yes." Lance yelped with his head flung backwards in distraught frenzy. "But it's more complex than that. She's mad that I've never introduced a girlfriend to her! She's like-" Lance immediately switched into a different accent, one used to mimic his grandmother. "'Chiquito, you haven't brought me a beautiful woman! You are such a handsome boy, you must have so many attractive women kissing the ground at your feet!'"

Keith snorted. "Yeah. Your grandma has no idea."

A growl escaped Lance and he whacked Keith's arm with one of the

textbooks. "This is important, so stop being an asshat for five minutes and listen!"

Keith raised his hands up in defense. "Alright, alright."

"Anyway-" Lance shot another glare in Keith's direction. "As I was saying, my Abuela. She expects me to bring home a girl. I need to find someone to be my girlfriend for christmas."

"Why is this an issue?" Pidge slid the glasses up against their nose. "I mean, you've gone home without a girlfriend before. Why is this Christmas any different?"

A sheepish gaze crept onto Lance's face. "Well," He swallowed, suddenly sitting up straight. "I sort of, kind of, um-"

"Spit it out!" Keith yelled, earning a few angry shushes from the librarians. He was getting tired of Lance's vague storytelling.

Lance gulped down a breath of air and waited until the librarians had dispersed. Then he finally spoke, his voice low and just above a whisper.

"I told my Mom that I'm bringing home a boyfriend instead."

Keith couldn't help it, he was laughing.

Lance slouched his body into the chair and rolled his neck backwards, nose pointed towards the ceiling. He rubbed at his temples, Keith still laughing into his sleeve at the left. "That's it. I'm gonna die alone."

"You're not going to die alone," Shiro sternly voiced, comforting Lance with a hand to the shoulder. "I'm sure there are lots of people who would love to date you."

Another loud, gleeful snort escaped Keith. "Uh-huh. Sure."

Lance was unphased by Keith's comment, too engulfed in his panic to care. "I mean, how the hell am I gonna find a boyfriend in two fucking days? And, like? Originally I thought saying 'boyfriend' instead of 'girlfriend' would be a good idea. A boyfriend would be easier to find, right? I could just ask one of you guys. But then I remembered about my Abuela! And she's homophobic! And she tugs at my ears! And she's intimidating, and passive aggressive, and-" He was pulling at his hair now, body back upright and tense from the

stress.

"Jeez, just make a boyfriend advertisement on craigslist." Pidge fingers flew at the keyboard, now completely engulfed in their essay. They were no longer interested in the conversation. Keith wasn't either, now with his phone pulled out and twitter on the screen.

"Hell, no. That'll bring weirdos." Lance twisted his head to the right, giving Shiro puppy dog eyes. "Shiro, will you come to my house for christmas and pretend to be my boyfriend?" Lance whimpered insistently, puckering his lip out and clasped his hands together. "Please?"

"I'm sorry," Shiro began, looking sympathetic, yet relieved. "I'm already going to Allura's house for christmas."

Lance cursed something under his breath before turning to Pidge. "What about you? Come on Pidge, we could-

"Not a chance." Pidge's tone was sincere and final. They stood up to put away their laptop and books, stuffing the items into a large green backpack. It appeared Pidge had enough of the library for one day.

"What about Hunk?" Lance continued, now grasping at straws. "He'd totally be willing to help me out."

Pidge pushed their chair in and swung the backpack over their shoulder. "That is a negative, actually. Hunk's sister is getting married back in Hawaii, there's no way you can pry him from that."

"Fuck-" Lance stammered, slamming his palms on the table again. "Guys, what am I gonna do?"

"Ask Keith to go. He's not even leaving campus for christmas."

At the sound of his name, Keith looked up from his phone. "Hm? You need something?" He hadn't been paying attention, which only made him more vulnerable to Pidge's dastardly plot.

"So," Pidge muttered, the gears in their head practically screaming. "You're not going anywhere for Christmas, right?"

"...Yeah?" Keith slowly answered, sensing ideas forming. "So?"

Pidge wore a demonic smile. "Then there's nothing holding you back from pretending to be Lance's Christmas boyfriend."

"Wait, what?!" Keith cried, giving Lance a disgusted look. "Hell no. No way, no fucking way."

Everyone but Keith (who was, honestly, super oblivious) noticed the large patch of red that was growing on Lance's cheeks. It was vibrant against his dark skin, and anyone could tell (again, except Keith) that Lance was embarrassed, and actually debating the idea in his head.

"You can't actually think this is a good idea-" Keith protested to Lance. "I mean, we'll kill each other!"

Lance stuttered. "O-Of course I don't like the idea!" He was grasping at straws, trying to find the right words to say without making a fool of himself. "It's the worst fucking idea Pidge has ever had, which is saying something-"

"Better than your stupid plans, Lance."

"-And believe me. I *do not* want to do it. But, well," Lance swallowed and turned even redder, if possible. "You're my only option."

Keith couldn't believe this.

"No."

"Please?"

"No."

Lance suddenly scrambled out of his seat, only to crawl around the table and kneel at the base of Keith's chair. Shiro was laughing behind a covered hand now, and the red had disappeared from Lance's face. "Please?"

Keith swore viciously and turned his head away so he didn't have to look at Lance's pathetic state. "No way, Sanchez. I'd rather die."

"Pleeeease?" Lance whined, drawing out the vowels long and profusely. "I'll do anything."

This sparked Keith's interest, and he raised an eyebrow. Having Lance Sanchez indebted to him didn't sound half bad.

Keith spoke slowly, sounding out the syllables. "Anything? At all?"

"That, my friends, is kinky." Pidge swung around on their heels harshly, walking as far away from the table as they possible could. "I'm out of here before Lance is sold into sucking Keith's dick."

Pidge waved a hand behind them while racing towards the Library stairs. They turned at the banister and were suddenly out of sight, probably on their way to find Hunk.

"That is *not* what I was suggesting," Lance insisted, then focused back on Keith. He stood up from his place at the floor and backed away a little. Both boys were blushing now. "I was just gonna offer a week of laundry or something."

Keith shook his head immediately. "That's an awful trade. I'd say it's more like, a whole month of laundry. Maybe two. Three, even."

Lance howled. "What! That is *way* too much. I am not cleaning your nasty underwear for two whole-"

"Lance."

This time it was Shiro who spoke, his laptop now put away and his bag on the table. "This is a great deal. I'd take it." He gave Lance a pointed look, one that Keith didn't really understand. For a moment the two boys seemed to have a silent conversation.

Finally, Lance turned his head to Keith, his mouth tilted into a small frown. It was obvious he was regretting everything about this.

"Fine. Two whole months of free laundry in exchange for two weeks of you being my fake boyfriend." He stuck out his hand, holding it in front of Keith's face to shake. "Deal?"

Keith hesitated for a moment. Was this really worth it? Hardly. Lance was an asshole, and he wasn't sure what fake dating would entail. But, free laundry was free laundry, right?

In a quick exchange, the two of them shook each other's hands. Keith gave Lance a curt nod, looking at his dark blue eyes for only a second. "Alright, it's a deal."

God, Keith was going to regret this.

Day 0

Thursday, December 15th

2:54 P.M.

"Jesus, how much shit are you even bringing?"

Lance poked his head out from behind the car's trunk, now filled to the very brim with both their luggage. "It's two weeks, Keith. I'm being smart about this."

Keith scowled. "You're never smart about *anything*."

Lance's head had disappeared back behind the trunk to continue his ridiculous luggage organization, but not before he flipped Keith the bird.

The car was small and old as shit, a nasty Corolla from 1987. Lance had defended her proudly, calling the car his 'Little Lady'. Obviously Lance knew nothing about cars, the thing was an ugly sight. Three dents, several scratches, and an ugly shade of beige. Keith couldn't believe they'd be driving the thing all the way to Arizona.

Nineteen hours with Lance. Nineteen terrible, long, ridiculous hours. That was one thousand, one hundred and forty minutes of dealing with Lance's obnoxious music taste. That would also include off key singing, bathroom pit stops every other hour, and the decision to eat at McDonalds for every *single meal*. Keith was close to death, he could feel it.

"I thought the driver was supposed to pick the music," Keith mentioned when they switched positions at a pit stop near the edge of the Oregon border. They'd been driving since three, and Keith was ready to listen to *anything* other than Beyonce, Kesha, or Nicki Minaj. Why hadn't he brought headphones?

"Nope," Lance answered in response, popping the 'p'. He hopped into the passenger seat and began to lean his seat back. "Owner of the car chooses the music. And that's me, I'm the owner."

"Well, that rule is bullshit."

Keith didn't protest much else, hoping that Lance would fall asleep so he could steal the aux cord from his phone.

His plan worked well, driving for five hours had truly worn Lance out. After Keith listened to Beyonce's 'Halo' for the fourth time that

trip, Lance was out cold. He slobbered onto the pillow that lay smooshed between the car window and his head, soft snores vibrating from his lips.

For another hour and a half Keith drove, happily content with Lance's soft snoring and his preferred music at low volume.

"Mm.." Lance mumbled into his pillow, wiping at the dried saliva that had stuck to his chin. "What time is it?"

Keith sighed, realizing his happy peace was over now that Lance was awake. "Check the clock."

Lance peered over at the analog clock. 9:39 P.M. He wiped at his eyes like a baby and became accustomed to his surroundings, until Keith noticed him scrunch his nose up in disgust.

"What?" Keith questioned, referring to the look of revulsion.

"Are you listening to Depeche Mode?!" Lance muttered, sitting up straighter in his seat, now fully awake. "Like, unironically?"

"Yeah? So?"

Lance snorted. "That's fucking cringey. Depeche Mode is emo '80s music."

"And your music taste isn't cringey?" Keith scoffed, rolling his eyes. "You listen to Beyonce. What are you, a mom in her late thirties?"

Lance gasped as if Keith had muttered sacrilege. "Beyonce is a wonderful gift to mankind! How can you not think so?"

"Oh my God," Keith groaned, tightening his grip on the steering wheel. "You're so gay ."

"What!? You're the gay one. I'm bisexual!"

Keith opened his mouth to protest, but couldn't think of any words to say. Lance was technically right on that one.

They drove through the night, each switching spots every two hours so the other could sleep. They came to an agreement after bickering that whoever drove could pick the music, and Keith had triumphantly played his Depeche Mode and Pet Shop Boys during his turns. He even tossed in a few modern songs, MCR and Panic!at

the Disco, all which Lance knew the words to but claimed were ridiculous.

Honestly, driving with Lance at night wasn't half bad. Whenever one was awake, the other was asleep. They didn't have to talk, which meant no bickering and salty comments. Keith liked driving with only his headlights to see, and the combination of the car's hum, the music at low volume, and Lance's steady breathing all created something serene.

Plus, Lance was cute when he slept. He wasn't an asshole when he was silent, and the way his long eyelashes lay closed against his skin made him look innocent. Except he was slobbering, and Keith couldn't help but think him a tall, lanky baby.

After stopping for breakfast at McDonald's around 6:40 a.m., the two of them were fully awake. Lance was driving, now in Arizona and on the main highway past Phoenix.

Lance attempted to say something that Keith couldn't understand, his mouth full of McGriddle breakfast sandwich.

"Dude, I can't hear you with your mouth full."

Lance swallowed his food. "I said; We need to make a plan. Like, set boundaries for kissing and stuff."

Keith gulped down a piece of his breakfast sandwich too fast, burning his tongue in the process. "Jesus—" He reached for his orange juice and took a swig. "What?"

"Boundaries." Lance repeated. "For when we're at my parent's house."

"Yeah, I got that. I mean, we'll have to kiss?"

"Yeah?"

"Fuck, you're serious?"

Lance spoke without moving his eyes from the road, though Keith could tell that Lance wasn't completely excited about the idea either. "It was kind of in the job description. You're my *fake boyfriend*. That'll include fake kissing, fake hugging, fake holding hands. We have to convince my family that we're gay for each other, after all."

"But I'm not gay for you!" Keith declared this louder than necessary. Keith wasn't gay for Lance, not in a million years. Lance was a pest, obnoxious, loud and far too boisterous for Keith's taste.

Lance looked ready to bang his head against the steering wheel.
"Obviously, idiot. That's why it's *fake*."

Keith ran through all the reasons why he'd ever agree to something so stupid. Originally it had sounded great. Free place to stay for Christmas, which meant free food and a nice house and probably stuff to do instead of playing Overwatch for two weeks straight. He was getting two months of laundry out of it, and Lance's Mom was supposedly a great cook.

But, kissing? Kissing Lance? On the mouth?

"Whatever," Keith began, pulling out his phone to see how much longer they had till Mesa del Caballo, Arizona. "I'll kiss you, I guess. But *only* in front of your family, you got it? This is specifically to keep up the act for your parents."

Lance nodded in agreement. "Also...there's the issue of my Abuela."

That, Keith realized, would be a problem. "She's homophobic, right? How will she react?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Lance confessed. "I've never really introduced a boyfriend to her. It's the girlfriends she really wants to meet."

"God, what a mess you've gotten into."

Lance flinched. "I know I fucked up! And I'm trying to fix it, but honestly this'll just be me facing my grandma once and for all. I'll have to sooner or later, so I guess it's a good thing."

Keith was shocked. He hadn't expected Lance to choose a mature approach, if even know how to be mature, in the first place. Keith was silent for a few moments, turning his head to watch the moving desert that passed by his window.

"You love your grandma, right?"

Lance's response was immediate. "Of course I do. She's my Abuela."

"So..." Keith swallowed. "So you want her approval."

"Of course."

"Then why are you bringing a boy home if she'd rather see a girl?"

Keith turned his gaze back to Lance, expecting a legit answer. It was so weird, talking about love and family. Keith never had either of those things.

"Maybe because my emotions matter too?" Lance's eyebrows were furrowed. "I don't know, I like boys just as much as girls, and that's something she needs to accept. If she really loves me she'll-" Lance swore loudly, swerving on the road. "Why the hell am I telling you this? It's angsty, and emotional, and super fucking weird. I'm uncomfortable, let's change the subject."

Keith happily obliged. "You're transformer is stupid." He flicked the small optimus prime that hung from the car's mirror. It was back to bickering after that, the two boys fighting over the ornament's true level of tackiness.

Keith wouldn't ever say it, but he liked the transformer figurine. He'd only called it stupid to change topics, and inside Keith was pleased they could return to their regularly scheduled dispute. Bonding and talking about personal things was just not their style.

Day 1:

Friday, December 16th

10:07 A.M.

"You live on a *farm* ?"

Lance laughed like Keith was stupid. "Have you seen me try to dig with a shovel? Fuck no."

"You literally live in the middle of nowhere." Keith countered, observing the yellow fields that rolled past their window. They were driving on a farm road, an actual farm road lined with weeds, blackberry bushes and the occasional rusty sign. Keith didn't even think these things existed.

"Most of my neighbors are farmers, but we aren't. My parents own the local grocery store in Mesa del Caballo. We've got chickens though, and a goat."

"A goat," Keith muttered in disbelief, watching greenery pass by as the car rumbled down a very long gravel driveway aligned by trees.
"Why the hell do you have a goat?"

"We milk her." Lance spoke matter of factly. "It's convenient. Plus Cinderella is super good with the kids."

Keith snickered. "You named your goat after a disney princess?"

"Correction; my sister named her. Cleo was going through a phase."

Finally, the house came into view. It was fairly large, obviously older than Keith, and reminded him of the house from Anne of Green Gables. He was already cringing, the chipped yellow paint and white trim already screaming of domesticity. Keith was used to apartments and townhouses that belonged to the foster families he lived with, not family homes with soccer balls lying in the lawn and bikes thrown across gravel.

They came cruising down the gravel driveway and into one of the empty spaces by the house. As Lance was putting the car into park, two small kids came sprinting from the open garage, a large boxer pounding out behind them.

"I thought you only had a goat and chickens!" Keith cried, watching in disbelief as a long line of slobber dripped from the dog's mouth.

Lance was beaming like it was already christmas, barely able to unhook his seatbelt with his shaking hands. He didn't even respond to Keith's question, instead wrenching the door open and practically tripping from the front seat.

The two kids, from what Keith could see from the car window, were probably around nine and five. Their ecstatic jumping and screaming only hyped the dog into pouncing the air.

"Lance!" The nine year old cried out gleefully. Her stringy brown hair and tan skin color were the same as Lance's, and Keith immediately put two and two together. She was Lance's youngest sister, Josephine. He'd given Keith a quick rundown earlier.

"Josie!" Lance screeched, leaning down to scoop his sister into a hug. She immediately wrapped her arms around his neck and squeezed like a small monkey. The dog practically attacked Lance's feet with slobber, trying their hardest to gain attention.

Keith wasn't sure what it was, but a part of him felt like he was prying. He'd only been at the Sanchez household for a good three minutes, and already he felt out of place.

"It'll be okay," Keith whispered to himself, now looking away from the affection and instead at his hands. "It'll be okay."

Who was he kidding?

The Sanchez family was huge. Keith had never lived with more than two people at a time.

Swallowing down his pride and any common sense he had left, Keith left the passenger seat of the car. His shoes hit gravel, and the sun beat down on his forehead. It was December in Arizona, so it was almost 70 degrees out. Keith was already preparing for tasteless, desert tap water and dried lips.

Turning around to the other side of the car, Keith watched Lance now hold the other child in his arms. He was a small boy with a short buzzcut and a star wars bandaid stuck to his forehead.

"-And then, when I fell off my scooter, my head bonked on the rock and now I have a battle scar!" The five year old pointed with a chubby finger at the bandaid. "See!"

Lance chuckled and set the boy back down to the gravel. "That is one nasty battle scar," He agreed while finally giving the dog some love by letting her kiss his face profusely.

"Who's that?" The boy asked, pointing at Keith with the same finger.

Lance turned to look at Keith, and immediately the dog started barking again. The large boxer rammed into Keith's legs, almost toppling him over. Keith reluctantly patted the dog's head, hoping the friendly action would get her to leave him alone.

"This is Keith," Lance proudly announced, grabbing Keith's hand to save him from the dog. "My boyfriend!"

Lance's palms were sweaty against Keith's, and although it was strange, Keith didn't want him to let go. If Lance let go then Keith would be alone under the gaze of two children, and nothing was more terrifying than children.

The five year old's eyes widened at the small display of affection,

his coffee colored irises growing in curious shock. "Boys can like boys?"

"Duh," Josie said with her hands at the waist of her pink shorts. "You can like anyone you want. That's what my mami says."

The boy was in complete awe. The new information was like an epiphany.

"I want a boyfriend," The boy whispered, his voice so quiet that Keith was surprised he ever heard him. Then, as if an idea had clicked, the boy demanded, "Uncle Lance, can I have your boyfriend?"

It was Lance's turn to have wide eyes. "Um, no?"

"Share your boyfriend with me!"

Keith must've been seeing things, but he swore there was a blush on Lance's cheeks. Instead of making a comment, Lance ruffled the boy's hair. "You're so silly, Mateo. I'm not sure what your Dad would think if you had a twenty-year-old boyfriend."

Mateo pouted, sticking his bottom lip out angrily. "But why not? Keith has cool hair! He can put it in a ponytail, and he looks like a samurai fighter guy."

Keith couldn't help it, he unconsciously reached for the hair tie that was pulling his longer hair together. He had tied it up during the car ride so he wouldn't sweat as much. Keith undid the ponytail and let his hair fall across his face, running a quick hand through to fix it.

"Oh, now you just look like a girl."

Keith scowled and reached to pull it back up, but Josie screeched instead and made both him and the dog jump.

"Jesus-" Keith cried, waving his hands away from his hair. The dog was barking again, and Keith really wished that the creature would be quiet.

"Leave it down!" Josie cried, anticipation flooding her face. "You're a disney prince! You look like a disney prince with your hair down! Lance!" She was squealing now, jumping up and down and exciting the dog even more. "You're dating a disney prince!"

Keith wasn't sure how to respond to that. Should he be offended or flattered? It was coming from a nine year old, and Keith was never trained on how to act with kids. He'd never had any siblings. So, instead of thanking her, Keith just gave Lance a deathly stare.

"Let's go inside," Mateo announced, grabbing for Keith and Lance's clasped hands. Keith had forgotten they'd been holding them for so long. Mateo broke them apart and lead them each by a hand. Josie raced ahead with the dog, probably off to find something more exciting.

The garage was exactly like Keith had imagined. There were bikes everywhere and shelves lined with canned food. A kayak hung from the back wall, random buckets of paint littered the floor, and an old tarp was flung in the corner. It was, to say the least, exactly what a garage for a family of eight looked like. Except with a lot more stains, muddy shoes, and large bags of dog food.

"Dad!" Mateo screamed once they'd entered the kitchen from the garage. "I have a boyfriend now!"

Of the two people in the kitchen, one man poked his head out from the refrigerator and looked highly concerned. From his facial features, Keith could tell that the man was Lance's oldest brother, except with a slight scruffy beard and a stronger build. He was *hot*, in a Dad sort of way.

"..Oh?" He pulled some milk out from the fridge and set it on the counter. "That is, um, exciting?" He was obviously concerned, though in a way that Keith couldn't identify as disgust.

Mateo tugged on Keith's arm hard, pulling him towards his dad. "Yes! He's Lance's boyfriend too. We are sharing."

"Just so you know," Lance began, raising his free hand up in defense. "I *never* agreed to this."

Lance's brother chuckled. "I'm just glad he's sharing, even if it is over a boy."

The other person in the kitchen, a teenage girl of about fourteen, raced to wrap her hands around Lance. Lance let go of Mateo's hand to squeeze the girl back, and Keith wondered how many times Lance was required to hug someone for his homecoming. Keith felt sorry for him, he'd hate to be hugged ten times in one day.

Keith must've jinxed it, because another Sanchez family member came pounding, actually pounding, down the stairs two at a time. It was a teenage boy, strangely in nothing but a towel at his waist, and looking at him made Keith give a double take. He looked exactly like Lance, down to the same haircut, hooked nose, skinny frame and bony structure. Except he was insanely smaller, hardly any muscle on his arm, and his ribs poked through his skin.

Lance tripped over his own feet getting to the boy. Lance had never seen his friend more excited, not even when he'd beat Keith at the kegster last year.

The two were screeching each other's names, and it reminded Keith of seagulls. The boy was named Benji, Keith couldn't forget his name now that he'd heard Lance scream it five times. The two embraced for a moment, still howling.

It wasn't until Benji almost dropped his towel that Keith remembered he was partially naked. Lance didn't seem to mind in the slightest, and he jerked away from the hug to pull his brother into a headlock. Keith looked away immediately, suddenly focused on the wall to his left that was decorated with family photographs.

"Benjamin!" The girl shrieked from behind the kitchen island. "Put some clothes on!" She didn't bother covering her eyes, and instead threw a damp towel from the sink at the two brothers. The two barely noticed, instead howling like animals.

Mateo was giggling at Keith's side, his small fingers still grasping tightly to Keith's hand. "Uncle Benji is naked," He notified Keith, as if he couldn't see the slipping towel with his own eyes.

Keith swallowed and forced himself to wear a smile. "I see that." God, the boy needed to put some pants on. He thanked the heavens there was a towel.

Watching Lance wrestle his brother was a surreal experience. Keith expected Lance to win, being the older brother, but Benji was able to slip from Lance's hold easily and switch positions. Benji was stronger despite the sickly lack of muscle in his skin, and Lance was suddenly lying with his back flat against the hardwood floor.

"I win!" Benji declared triumphantly, his fists pumping the air. The towel began to slip from his lack of hips and he squirmed to catch it.

Lance groaned from his place on the ground, and Keith noted that Lance was lame enough to be defeated by his own kid brother. He'd have to mention that to Pidge when he got back.

"Hey, who is this?" Benji questioned with his attention on Keith, not bothering to lean down and help Lance up.

"I'm -"

"That's Keith!" Somehow Lance had managed to launch himself from the floor and grab Keith's hand, *again*. Just as before the two clasped fingers, and Keith couldn't help but wonder if Lance *enjoyed* holding his hand.

"He's my boyfriend," Lance added, that cocky grin still displayed on his face. He squeezed Keith's palm and tightened their fingers together, sending a small shiver down Keith's spine. What did Lance think he was doing?

"He's my boyfriend too!" Mateo managed to interject.

Benji smirked, looking Keith up and down. "Wow, Lance actually managed to get a boyfriend? And a hot one no less? What a miracle."

Lance let go of Keith's hand to fold his arms over his chest in defense. "Actually, yes." He wore his signature shit eating grin, the one he tended to give Keith after an awful pun.

Benji clicked his tongue. "Damn, Keith, I'm sorry. I bet he's awful in bed."

Keith couldn't help but laugh, both at Benji's triumphant smile and the visible shock on Lance's face. Lance's older brother, who he now knew as Daniel, had decided it was that exact moment for him to leave the room with Mateo protesting at his arm.

"I'll have you know," Lance scoffed, now blushing. "That I am a *beast* in bed. Keith should know!" Lance peered over at Keith with what he could only identify as a scream for help. "Right, Keith?"

Keith's eyes widened. "Uh -"

"Don't answer that," Danny interjected, raising his hands up to stop. "I *really* don't wanna know, and my son is present."

"Thank you," Lance's sister, Cleo, commented with her hands arm deep in soapy water from the sink. "I really didn't want to hear about Lance's sex life."

None of them prepared for when an older woman entered the room, a laundry basket at her hip. She took one look at Benji's half naked stated, and suddenly she was whacking him with a towel from her basket. "¡Oye! ¿Qué demonios está sucediendo? Benji, por qué estás desnudo! Volver a la ducha!" Keith peered at Lance for any explanation, but none ever came.

Benji lowered his head and sulked, turning to go back up the stairs. "Sí, mamá." As he moved to return to his shower, Keith caught Benji stealthily flipping Lance the bird behind his mother's gaze. Then he was sprinting up the stairs, clutching at his towel in the process.

After placing her basket on the ground, the woman pulled Lance into a big, squishy hug. Keith immediately recognized her from one of the photographs in Lance's dorm. She was round and had plump cheeks, with long black hair pulled into a tight bun on her head.

"Welcome home, mijo." Mrs. Sanchez reached up on her tiptoes to place a kiss at Lance's forehead.

Keith ached, physically felt his stomach lurch and twist inside his skin. It was the same feeling from before, a sense of displacement. He wasn't meant to be here, meant to watch such loving affairs happen between family members. This was someone else's family, someone else's intimate relation.

Keith looked away, attention back at the photograph wall. He counted four photographs, all of them family portraits from different points in time. The last photo was the oldest, and Keith could point out five year old Lance without hesitation. Young Lance had a his two front teeth missing, and Keith unconsciously smiled.

"Hello."

Keith jumped, turning his attention back to the woman in front of him. Mrs. Sanchez held out a hand, obviously introducing herself. "I'm Lance's mom, but you can call me Rosa or Mrs. Sanchez." Keith noted a spanish accent faded into her words, an accent he guessed had at one time been a lot stronger.

He smiled politely and shook her hand, keeping eye contact for a brief moment. "I'm Keith. Keith Gyeong."

She beamed at him, presenting a smile that Keith felt displaced under. Why had she smiled at him like that? It was sweet, motherly, friendly, and he wasn't sure how to respond. Did he smile back? How did one act in this situation?

"Pleasure to meet you, Keith."

He swallowed, wanting so badly to do something with his hands. They felt strange and sweaty, so he stuffed them into his front pocket. "Thanks so much for letting me stay for Christmas. It means a lot."

Rosa waved away her hand. "Oh, don't mention it. I'm always—" She paused to give Lance a crooked smile. "*Always* happy when Lance brings home guests."

"Mamá -"

"And he's never brought anyone home before! You're the first, how exciting!"

Keith could tell from Mrs. Sanchez' tone of voice that she was teasing him.

"Oh?" Keith raised an eyebrow. "Wow! Lance, you didn't tell me this!" His face displayed a devilish grin, one that was reciprocated from Lance with a scowl.

"Y-Yeah." Lance swallowed. "Well, the formalities have been nice and all, but Keith and I need to get our stuff." In one sharp motion Lance had gripped Keith's arm and tugged him in the direction of the garage.

Lance made his quick escape out of the kitchen, Keith following close after. The moment Cleo and Rosa were out of sight, Lance's hand ripped from Keith's arms. "Jesus," Lance muttered to himself, running a hand through his hair unconsciously. "My Mom is so—"

"Nice?" Keith wondered aloud.

Lance huffed, though he was smiling. "She's a tease, that's what she is."

The two boys traveled to the car in silence, the only sound being the distant nickering of horses a field over and the crunch of gravel under their feet.

"So," Keith began while pulling his one and only suitcase from the trunk. "You're an awful wrestler."

Lance poked his head out from the front seat. "Huh?"

"Your younger brother won that little fight, and I don't know if you noticed, but he's probably ninety pounds."

Keith had expected to get a rile out of Keith over that, maybe a salty comment or a lame comeback. Instead Lance frowned, his tone turned serious and cold.

"I don't expect you to understand."

"Understand what?"

Lance huffed and slammed the door a little too harshly. He held onto the handle for a moment, staring at the window of the car without blinking.

"You're insufferable, you know that?"

"It's not like you're the most fun to be around either. Do you really think I want to be here?"

Lance looked away, tightening his grip on the phone charger. "No, probably not." He let out a shaky breath and turned his gaze back on Keith. "Whatever, it's not important."

"You're such a baby," Keith taunted. "Just tell me, what's the big issue?"

"Fuck you." Lance walked to the car's trunk and began pulling out his suitcase and pillows, not looking at Keith in any way.

"Come on, Lance."

Lance let out a heated huff, and suddenly he was staring at Keith with a look he'd never seen before. "I let him win."

"Oh bullshit-

"I've always let him win. It's something I've always done, even when we were kids." Lance pulled out the last of the luggage and slammed the trunk closed. "Now drop it."

"But why?"

"I said, *drop it* ."

The two of them were silent while walking back inside the house, and Keith's mind couldn't help but wander. Lance was the most competitive person he knew. The two of them could compete for hours, and Lance was always confident that he could do things better than Keith. Everything with them was a competition; their grades, sports, the amount of beers they could drink in one sitting, the amount of pizza slices one could eat. It just didn't seem in Lance's personality to *let someone win* . Not unless he loved that person more than anyone in the world.

Maybe Benji was that person.

Lance lead Keith up the stairs and down a hallway lined with hardwood floors. Keith noted the bathroom at the end of the hallway, the door ajar to reveal leftover steam from Benji's shower.

Lance kicked the door to his bedroom open with his foot, revealing a medium sized room with a twin sized bed pushed into the corner. Keith cringed at the Bleach anime poster on the wall, followed by several Star Wars posters and a couple Naruto prints.

"What the—" Lance yelped, dropping his luggage so he could race into the room. "Where's the bunk bed?"

Benji randomly appeared at the door frame, leaning against it with one hip. He was now freshly showered, wearing a nike t-shirt and sweats. "Mom gave it to Josie."

Lance looked ready to scream, his jaw dropped open. "What!? But, why? It was *our* bunk bed! I thought—"

Benji sighed and slipped into the room so he could flop onto the mattress. "Our feet were always hanging off. We're too tall for it."

Lance looked personally offended. "But, but it was *the* bunk bed! We played pirates on that, and I fell off the top bunk and sprained my ankle when I was seven!" He looked ready to cry, and Keith buried his laughter into his sleeve.

"Dude, it's literally in the next room."

"Well, yeah! But now I don't have a cool bunk bed!"

"Lance, you're a college kid. You don't need a bunk bed." Benji shook his curly wet hair to wring it out. "Plus, now you can share a bed with Keith. Cuddling and gay stuff, right?"

That made Keith's laughing stop short. Cuddle? Share? As in, share a bed with Lance Sanchez? As in, sleeping next to Lance? Keith felt his skin go pale and his palms get sweaty around the handle of his suitcase.

Benji chuckled. "Cut the crap, Lance. You know you're excited, now you guys can have sex and no one will bother you."

"BENJI!" Lance screamed, suddenly hitting his brother with the end of a pillow. "What the heck? You can't just say stuff like that casually! You're, like, twelve."

"I'm sixteen!" Benji countered.

"Get. Out." Lance grabbed Benji's arms and practically kicked him out of the room. "Get out, right now, leave us, leave-"

"Have fun!" Benji called before the door slammed in his face. "Use protection!"

It was quiet between the two of them, now that Benji was gone from the room. Lance stood with his ear against the closed door, eyebrows furrowing in concentration.

"Is he gone yet-"

"SHH."

Keith rolled his eyes and moved to the bed, dragging his suitcase behind him. "He's gone, Lance. You can chill."

After a moment, Lance finally moved away from the door. "You never know. Benji is a little shit." "Yeah," Keith agreed, flopping down on the bed and stretching out onto the pillow. "But you love him."

Keith wasn't sure what it was that had urged him to say that, but a part of him was glad he did. It was worth it just to see the content, serene look on Lance's face.

"Yeah," Lance agreed, eyes staring at nothing. "I really do."

Keith wasn't sure what it was, but he found himself asking a question that was, in a way, very un-Keith-like.

"Tell me about your siblings."

Lance's ears perked up, and he raised an eyebrow. "Seriously?"

Keith shrugged and stretched a bit more on the bed, his shirt riding up an inch to show pale skin. "Yeah. I mean, I'll be with them for two weeks. I wanna know what I'm getting into."

Lance took a seat on the bed next to Keith and began to untie his shoes. "Well you've met all of them but Sophia. We don't see her anymore."

"Really? I thought all your siblings loved you." Keith couldn't help the teasing hint in his voice.

"Oh, hell no. I used to fight with Daniel all the time. He's just matured since he got married and had a kid. And Cleo? Hell, I was awful to her as a kid. When she was a newborn and I was six, I bit her foot and made her bleed because my mom wasn't paying attention to me."

Keith laughed. That definitely sounded a like a Lance thing to do. "She doesn't seem to hate you now."

"Nah," Lance agreed. "We're older now. That rivalry is long gone."

"So," Keith toyed with the drawstring of his sweatpants, grey ones he'd worn for the long drive. "Why does Sophia hate you?"

Lance's face paled, and he bit his lip. "I don't really, I just. I don't know. Why are we even talking about this?"

Keith shrugged. "Um, because we're bonding?"

A huff escaped Lance's lips. "Whatever. Bonding moment is over." Lance launched himself from the bed and reached for his suitcase, signalling that the conversation was at a close.

Keith couldn't help but wonder if Lance was keeping stuff from him. Okay, scratch that, Keith *knew for a fact* that Lance was keeping away info. But did Lance really need to tell him anything at all? They were just pretending. This relationship was a fake one, and Keith only considered himself Lance's mutual friend, if that at all.

They could keep their secrets, they could do whatever the hell they wanted.

Keith moved onto his side so he was facing the wall. "I'm gonna take a nap," He told Lance half heartedly. Lance responded with a lazy grunt, signalling that he'd heard.

After a few moments of silence between the two, Keith felt his eyelids grow heavy. He closed them fully, and slowly his breath evened out into sleep.

Day 1

3:18 P.M.

Something strange nudged itself against Keith's neck, a tongue tracing against his hairline. A sensation of warm breath put his hairs on end, and in his state of sleep, Keith moved into the touch. A low groan slipped from Keith's throat, and the tongue continued to slip against the goosebumps on his neck.

What a wonderful dream this was.

"Lance," He mumbled into the pillow, his eyes still closed shut from sleep. A small puddle of saliva stained the fabric beneath his open mouth, and in his dreaming state Keith continued to murmur incoherent words.

The feeling of rough scales scraped Keith's neck, and suddenly his eyes shot open. If he hadn't been awake before, he was *definitely* awake now.

And in bed with him? Curling next to his back, long reptilian tongue hanging from it's mouth, was a three foot long iguana.

Keith screeched so loud that the iguana launched itself from the bed, only to scurry across the hardwood floor and slip into the arms of little Mateo.

Flung into a sitting position, Keith had sweat on his forehead and ragged breath whistling through his teeth. "What—" He wheezed between breaths, his pupils dilated and his heart pounding. "Was that?"

Mateo's high pitched, small voice answered him. "That was Greedo!"

"Greedy?" Keith questioned the boy. "The lizard's name—" He gulped down some air and attempted to calm down his rapid pulse. "Is Greedy?"

"It's an iguana!" Mateo announced while stroking the iguana's head. "I brought him in here to say hello, but you were asleep." Mateo was crawling onto the bed with the iguana now, and he tugged at the strange blanket Keith was wrapped in. Since when had Keith been in a blanket? He didn't recognise the soft fabric or remember ever falling asleep with it.

As Mateo squirmed to get beneath the comforter, Greedy escaped from the child's grasp. Keith shrieked and scrambled to the corner of the bed, attempting to get as far away from the iguana as possible.

"Why is he so big?!" Keith yelped frantically, pushing his body up against the interjoining walls. He was cornered, and the iguana didn't seem to be moving anywhere, just flicking its ugly reptile eyes.

God, why did the Sanchez family have so many animals? Lance *claimed* they didn't live on a farm, but so far this felt like a bloody zoo. Chickens, a goat, a dog, and now an iguana? What was next? Tigers?

Mateo squealed. "He likes you!"

Keith stuttered and turned his eyes to Mateo with a plea for help. "G-Get him away from me!"

Mateo reached for the Iguana and pulled him into his lap. He treated the creature like a stuffed animal, but with more care and compassion. He'd stroke the reptile's head and hold him close to his chest, as if the iguana was a small kitten. Except Greedy had scales, not fur, and was probably more than half the size of Mateo himself.

"It's alright, Greedy," Mateo whispered to the iguana, patting his head thoughtfully. "Keith is just scared because he doesn't know you very well. Don't be sad, you are very unique. That's what my mami tells me!" He sounded out the syllables of 'unique' as if he was still trying to learn the word correctly. "Keith will think so too after he gets to know you."

Mateo was such a puzzle. The boy was so kind and warmhearted. Yet, the way he spoke to the Iguana made Keith wonder if the five-

year-old had heard those exact same words too, but from his own parents.

Keith sighed and crawled off the bed. Peering at the full length mirror hanging from the wall to his right, Keith noticed his hair was a wild mess of bedhead. He cursed under his breath, hoping Mateo hadn't heard, and began running his hands through his hair to fix it.

"You sleep talk," Mateo declared nonchalantly.

That caught Keith's attention, making him pause and turn his head.
"What?"

"You sleep talk!" Mateo repeated, and this time the two were making eye contact. Keith didn't like looking in people's eyes, especially with a small five-year-old whose eyeballs practically bore holes in his skull.

Keith frowned. "No I don't."

Mateo giggled. "Yeah you do! You like to say Uncle Lance's name. You say it lots. You go, 'Lanceee, Lancceee, Lanccee'."

That sent a shiver up Keith's spine.

Alright, so maybe he had dreamt about Lance. But that was obviously just a random dream, it didn't really *mean* anything. He had dreams about guys all the time! It wasn't like he actually *wanted* to make out with Lance. That was a stupid idea.

Except, no matter the excuses Keith forced into his head, he still felt anxiety creep and crawl and muddle his insides.

"Do you dream about him?" Mateo wondered aloud. "Do you-" He gasped. "Do you *love* him?"

Keith had no idea what he was doing, or what the hell he was even saying. But he found himself doing it anyway.

"Mateo," Keith whispered, suddenly leaning down next to the bed so that the two were eye level. He was fully ignoring the iguana now, not caring when it crawled past him and out the door. "Can you keep my sleep talking a secret?"

The five year old nodded his head instantly, eyes round in anticipation.

"It's a big secret, and you're the *only one* who gets to know." Keith was now holding Mateo's hands, clasping the small palms in his own.

Mateo was taking this very seriously, his little eyebrows furrowed and his bottom lip slightly puckered. "Yes, I can keep your secret. I am good at secret keeping,"

Keith nodded. "We're partners now, partners in crime."

"Wow," Mateo whispered even quieter, squeezing Keith's hands. "I think we are good partners in crime."

And then something strange happened; Keith smiled. It wasn't that Keith didn't smile, he did at least every now and then. But this grin, this one was different. This was caused by an odd feeling that felt foreign to Keith, a sense of protectiveness. Normally Keith despised kids. But Mateo? He suddenly had the urge to hold him and never let go.

Why? Because they were partners in crime.

Day 1

3:49 p.m

After chasing down Greedo and banishing him to his cage, both Mateo and Keith decided it was time Keith go back to the family. Falling asleep not even an hour after arriving wasn't the best way to make a first impression, and Keith regretted ever letting his head touch the pillow in the first place.

Keith realized later on that the Sanchez family didn't care about first impressions. At least not in the way Keith thought they would.

"I'm sorry I couldn't make you a welcome home dinner," Rosa rambled on as she raced across the kitchen to grab her car keys. They hung from a family key hook next to the fridge, a large yoda keychain dangling from the ring. Benji came sprinting past the kitchen with a guitar case in hand, Josie fumbling behind while *still* attempting to tie her shoelaces.

"Mamá ! We've gotta go!" Benji raised his eyebrows impatiently and pointed towards the front door. "It starts in ten minutes!"

"Again, I'm sorry," Rosa repeated, all while ignoring her impatient

son. "Danny and Rachel will be here, but I think Rachel took Mateo to buy Christmas gifts."

Lance just smiled, swatting at his mother to get going. "Don't worry about it, Mamá ."

"It's just-" Rosa continued, never stopping or halting to breathe. "Benji has guitar practice at four, Josie has girl scouts and Cleo-

"Ma," Lance calmed her, holding her shoulders and kissing her hairline. "It's okay. Keith and I can eat a frozen pizza."

The woman sighed, accepting defeat. She stood in Lance's arms for a moment, still and clutching her son's arms.

"Are you sure?"

Lance nodded. "You gotta buy me donut's while you're out, though."

Benji groaned, practically swinging his guitar case around in annoyance. "Mamá! I'm gonna be late!"

Rosa scowled before shouting behind her, "Just get in the car, Benjamin! I'll be right there."

Lance chuckled and gave his mother another hug, her head just barely scraping the bottom of Lance's chin.

Keith felt absurd; he was a stranger imposing on an exchange between mother and son. It was so foreign to Keith- he couldn't remember a single time ever being held like that.

"Anyway," Rosa continued, moving away from her son and grabbing her purse from the kitchen counter. "I *will* be making a welcome home meal, whether you like it or not."

"Anything I want?"

Rosa nodded. "Anything you want."

With that she was gone, Josie scrambling to catch up in her girl scout vest.

Once Rosa had left with the children, Keith and Lance were left to their own devices. The only other individuals in the house were Greedo, Danny (who just happened to be passed out on the couch

with a two year old girl asleep on his chest,) and Terminator - the dog.

Keith had never been a huge fan of dogs. If anything, Keith was a cat person. They were cuddly and soft, they rubbed their fur against your legs and purred. Dogs though, dogs were terrible. They slobbered, they smelled, and they jumped on you at the most inconvenient of times. Terminator was all of those things - and more. Keith was amazed at how much Lance loved the creature, or even how Lance could tolerate kissing that slobber covered dog mouth.

Keith leaned against the counter and took a bite out of an apple, watching as Lance popped a frozen pizza into the oven.

"Isn't your Mom - I don't know - worried we'll have sex with the house empty?"

Lance's face squirmed in disgust and he slammed the oven door closed. "Um, ew? No?"

Keith swallowed down another bite. "*Really* think about it. We're two college students, 'supposedly' dating, and she just left us home alone."

"We're not home alone - there's Danny and Isabella." Lance pointed through the kitchen door and into the living room, motioning to a sleeping father and toddler.

Keith gave Lance a blank stare. "You and I *both* know you've had sex with people in the same building."

"I have not!"

A snort. "Remember Rolo?"

Lance paled, the pink leaving his dark cheeks. He slowly shut the door to the oven, all while looking blankly at anywhere *other* than Keith.

"That was - That was a one time thing."

"Hunk said he heard you three times."

Lance cursed under his breath, all while viciously tossing the pizza box into the recycling. "That traitor."

Keith chuckled into his hand, having finished his apple. He tossed the core into the garbage and turned to face Lance. "So, what I'm saying is, if your Mom asks? What should we tell her?"

"My Mom isn't gonna ask if I have sex. That's weird."

"But if she asked. What then? "

Lance groaned, running a hand through his hair and striding through the kitchen and into the basement. "Well, if my mom asks about my sex life, I'll just have to lie."

"And say what?"

Lance never missed a beat, speaking as if the answer was completely acceptable.

"Say that we have sex."

It was Keith's turn to go pale, the bluntness of Lance's words making Keith stutter. Keith was fine with lying about having sex. This was a fake relationship, it required lying, so that was fine. What he *wasn't* fine about was that it was Lance.

Lance made Keith *angry*. He pushed his buttons and plucked at his skin, he annoyed Keith to no end. It was a miracle they'd survived the trip a full day, let alone agree to it in the first place.

Except, despite Lance's flaws, annoyances, and the things he did that made Keith want to scream- Lance was a funny guy. The two actually got along when they weren't bickering, usually bonding over video games, movies, even the torment of their other friends. Sure they bickered a lot, but after that? They could laugh. The two of them may not have been best buds, but they were definitely friends, in a weird, twisted sort of way.

"So," Keith muttered, changing the subject drastically. "What movie do you wanna watch?"

Day 1

5:57 P.M.

"I can't believe we're having this conversation," Keith whispered, fingers rubbing his temples. "It's a fight - our first fight as a couple."

Lance sat on the floor of the basement, a circle of DVDs placed around his crossed knees. They were the Star Wars movies, each placed in order from best to worst. The two boys had originally planned on finding a simple move and popping it into the DVD player - not this deep conversation that they'd *already had* several times before.

"Don't be so dramatic - this isn't our first fight." Lance mumbled this as he continued to shift his movie order, placing 'Revenge of the Sith' right next to 'The Phantom Menace'. "I merely said that *The Force Awakens* was on the same level as *A New Hope*. That doesn't mean you have to get all theatrical on me."

Keith groaned, (rather dramatically) and stretched his body across the red couch. "But, it's *not* on the same level! '*The Force Awakens*' was a cinematic masterpiece! It should be right there next to *The Empire Strikes Back*!"

Lance paused, almost dropping the DVD in hand. "Bullshit-" He cursed, voice low. "*The Empire Strikes Back* is the *best*. I will fight you on this."

"I never said it *wasn't* the best - it obviously is - but what I'm saying is that *TFA* is also super good!"

"But it's not," Lance whined. "Finn was annoying."

Keith gasped. "Finn is my boyfriend!"

"I thought *I* was your boyfriend."

Again making another noise of frustration, Keith sat up straighter on the couch and flopped his legs to the floor. "Fake boyfriend." He paused, folding his arms over his chest. "My point is - don't diss *The Force Awakens*."

Lance began to name things off with his fingers, a glint in his eye that Keith could only recognize as malice.

"There was Finn who complained - way too much. Rey was super hot but, like, she didn't ever use that staff of hers? Like, what the fuck? And Poe was *barely* in the show and was obviously the best character-"

"Alright, I'm done. I'm done with this conversation. We're watching something else."

Keith stood up and wrenched the DVD cupboard open, revealing colorful shelves lined with movies. He trailed his hand along the spines, stopping until he found one he deemed satisfactory.

Without Lance's opinion to stop him, Keith immediately popped the DVD into its player by the wall. "We're watching this one," He exclaimed, grabbing the remote control from the coffee table.

"What is it?"

"If I tell you you'll start to complain about *something* they did wrong. I just want to enjoy a movie." Keith plopped back onto the couch and grabbed a pillow, wrapping his arms around the cushion and burying in his nose.

As soon as the title screen came on, an excessive groan erupted from Lance's side of the couch. "Back to the Future? Are you kidding me?"

"Nope—" Keith bellowed, placing a finger over Lance's lips. "No talking. We're gonna enjoy this."

As the movie began, Keith noted how tired Lance was. The boy had tried his hardest not to show it before, what with meeting his family again and introducing them to his famous boyfriend. Now that it was silent, the two of them wrapped in blankets on the basement couch. It was serene; the lights had turned down low, and the two were finally able to relax.

"You can fall asleep," Keith whispered twelve minutes in, watching as Lance's heavy eyelids struggled to stay open. "I'll tell you what happens."

Lance's voice was barely intelligible, mixed with sleepy hums and the slow fall of his head. "I've, I've already, I've already seen it."

Keith smiled, instead pulling Lance's blanket higher up over his chest. "Sleep."

Lance didn't need to be told again. He was out, eyes tightly closed, mouth hanging open to release soft snores. It was cute - even if he was slobbering.

Keith enjoyed the movie for a few more minutes before it happened: Lance's head falling against Keith's shoulder. He snuggled up against his right side, unconsciously burying his head into the crook of

Keith's neck.

Keith blushed, feeling embarrassed despite being the only other person in the room. He couldn't move either - Lance had latched himself on and refused to let go.

What was he supposed to do? Push Lance away? That would wake him up, and no matter how badly Keith wanted his arm back, the innocent look Lance wore was enough to stop him.

Maybe Keith could just close his eyes too. The idea was intriguing - he'd been up driving all of the night prior.

Keith finally gave in, letting his eyes drift close just as Lance's had. He didn't even bother to turn off the movie; all to fall asleep with his cheek pressed against the fuzz of Lance's hair.

Day 2

Saturday, December 17th

9:17 A.M.

Keith woke up to find Lance slobbering against his shoulder.

It wasn't a pleasing sight - the boy was never a pretty sleeper. He always slept with his jaw hanging wide open, slobber dangling from a lip and snores pulsing in through his mouth and out through his nose.

"Shit," Keith murmured with sleepy eyes, rubbing at a sharp pain that jabbed itself at the base of his neck. It was no doubt caused from his terrible sleeping position, and Keith already had Lance to blame.

Lance snored against Keith's shoulder, preventing every attempt Keith might've made at escape. After Keith's fourth try he finally gave up, officially pushing Lance forcefully off his right side. Lance gurgled a few incoherent words as his body flopped against the basement carpet, and Keith only snickered when Lance continued to snore.

The idea of the Sanchez family - a family of strangers - seeing Keith with bed head *should've* made Keith feel anxious. It normally would've, had it not been for the equally embarrassing bedhead that Cleo and Benji sported.

"Morning," Cleo gurgled into her cheerios when Keith arrived up the basement stairs. "You have fun sleeping on the couch?"

Keith rubbed at his eyes. "Not even close. Lance hogs everything, even my shoulder."

Benji snorted and set down a glass of orange juice. "That's what you get for bein' nasty."

Keith would've responded, though he strangely felt it not his place. This was Lance's brother, Lance's best friend, Lance's sibling. It would feel, well, *strange* for Keith to partake in the banter.

"Your hair is great. Just by the way." Cleo smiled up at Keith again, this time a mouth full of milk. Feeling awkward, Keith absentmindedly ran fingers through his hair, feeling the stiffness the couch cushions had shaped it to become.

"T-Thanks?" Keith stuttered, not sure how to act. It was different when Lance was there - Lance always masked Keith by being so enthusiastic. Keith could stand by the sidelines and smile, watching the family events go by without ever having to participate. However, without Lance? That's when he felt vulnerable. And there Keith was, standing in his wrinkled clothes from the day before, all by himself in the kitchen.

"You don't have to be scared, you know."

Keith's eyes widened at Cleo's words, and he felt his shoulders tense.

"You really don't," She continued, standing up to put her bowl in the sink. "We aren't going to judge you here. I know it's strange, meeting your boyfriend's family, but we don't bite."

"Sometimes. *Sometimes* we don't bite."

Cleo threw Benji a nasty look, one that only made him snicker into his arm.

"What I'm *trying* to say-

Benji stood up and cut Cleo off, placing a firm hand on Keith's shoulder. "Is don't worry, man. Cleo's right- we don't judge. We're just glad you make Lance happy." With one firm squeeze to the shoulder Benji had moved, taking his bowl to lay in the sink beside

Cleo's.

Keith bit his lip, watching as Benji took the stairs up to his room two at a time.

He knew that Benji's words were meant to be kind. And it's true - they did calm Keith's anxieties, as well as his fears of disapproval. Still, Keith couldn't help but feel a swell of guilt. They were lying to this family, and the worst part was that Keith wanted to keep doing it.

Once Benji was gone Cleo showed Keith around the kitchen. She pointed out where he could get cups for water and the cereal cupboard; she even showed him the kid's drawer. This was a 'special' drawer, one only used by Josie and her younger cousins. It held many things; plastic bowls covered in ninja turtles, plates designed with Disney princesses, even a large cup with Princess Leia on the front. Some looked old, the images on the plastic slowly grown to fade with every use. One plate in particular stood out to Keith, and he pointed at it immediately.

"What's that one?"

Cleo noticed the plate and snorted. It was a white plate, though the original color had obviously faded to a thin yellow. The plate was covered in marker, all drawings done by a child.

"My mom thinks she's really crafty? But she's not, she hasn't sewn a dress or made greeting cards once in her *life*. Anyway, when we were kids she'd try to think up new crafts for us. One of them was drawing on a plate, which is sort of weird? Anyway, that one is Lance's."

Raising an eyebrow, Keith grabbed the plate from the drawer to inspect it. The drawing was terrible, probably done when Lance was five or six. It was in all blue, the lines thin and shaky.

After examining the plate, Keith came to realize that the drawing was of two people: A small boy and an older girl. Their bodies were round and their arms simple lines, reminding Keith of potato people. In the corner of the plate was a small note, one written in handwriting that obviously belonged to Rosa.

'Sophia and me' by Lance Sanchez

Age six

March, 2001

Keith swallowed, realizing how valuable the plate in his hands was. He set the plate back down softly.

"Anyway," Cleo continued, shoving the steep drawer back into place. "You should go wake Lance up. I hear you two are babysitting today?"

Day 2

Saturday, December 17th

5:21 P.M.

Keith considered his first 'official' day at the Sanchez house to be rather successful. No issues ensued and no one suspected the fake relationship, thus only sedating Keith's worries. The two boys had lounged about at the beginning of the day, all before getting roped into an impromptu babysitting job.

Keith had mostly taken care of Mateo, Lance more preoccupied with Josie and Mateo's little sister, Isabella. Mateo had obviously taken a liking to Keith, constantly pulling him by the fingers to show him objects of interest. Mateo's admiration might've skyrocketed even higher when Keith let the small boy draw scribbles on his legs, turning Keith's pale skin a bright mesh of green, yellow, and red crayola marker.

When Rosa and Mateo's parents returned with groceries, Lance and Keith were both relieved to be free of children. Mateo ran off to ride his bike out front with Rachel, telling his mother in a rather excessive voice about *all* the fun things he'd done that day.

"Keith is nice," Mateo explained, pointing in Keith's general direction. "He let me draw on him."

The hours dragged by, leading into the late afternoon. Rosa began dinner, recruiting her children for the task. Keith hadn't been given a job, and just watching them from the island made him feel useless. Mrs. Sanchez stood behind a large cutting board, slicing pieces of chicken with a sharp knife. Benji was shucking corn at the kitchen table, and Lance was *supposed* to be unloading the dishwasher.

Keith found himself at Rosa's side, watching her cut the chicken

intently. He cleared his throat. "Mrs. Sanchez?"

The woman looked up and raised her eyebrows. "Hmm?"

"Do you, uh—" Keith stuttered and found he couldn't make eye contact with her. "Do you want me to do that?"

The moment he asked the question her lips turned into a smile. A happy wrinkle appeared at the crease of her eyes, and she nodded her head. "Of course! Help is always welcome." She turned and pointed at the large sink with her knife. "Wash your hands first."

Keith obediently nodded and moved to do as he'd been told. Lance, whose body draped over the island, had his phone in hand.

"Why are you helping?" Lance questioned, looking up from his phone.

"Because it's *nice* ." Keith scrubbed at his hands with soap a little too harshly. "Shouldn't you be unloading the dishwasher or something?"

Lance's eyes widened. "Fuck!" He scrambled around the island to reach the dishwasher. "I forgot!"

Mrs. Sanchez whacked her son with a towel, and her voice was scolding. "Language, Lance."

"Shit, I'm sorry!" He mumbled, and he flinched when he realized he'd cursed again. "Sorry! Sorry sorry sorry Mom I—"

She whacked him again for the second time he swore, and he squealed like a child, racing away from his mother's reach. Keith heard Benji's snickers from the kitchen table.

"Come back and unload the dishes!" His mother called out when Lance scurried away into the living room. She sighed and turned to Keith, handing him the cutting knife.

"Make sure he actually unloads." Mumbling a few words in spanish under her breath that Keith couldn't understand, Mrs. Sanchez grabbed a large plastic bowl and headed towards the back door. "I'm grabbing vegetables from the garden," She notified Keith. "Don't let him use his romantic charms on you! He'll do anything to get out of chores!"

Keith felt himself blush and he immediately began to protest,

"That's not-"

He couldn't finish what he was saying, instead watching the small woman shut the glass screen door behind her. He signed and turned to the chicken, knife in hand.

After about a full minute of staring at the raw chicken, Keith realized that he had absolutely no idea what he was doing.

Why did he think this was a good idea? He'd never really *cooked* before. Well, some of his foster parents had taught him a few things, like how to use measuring cups and the difference between tablespoons and teaspoons. But everything else? Keith had no idea.

Benji must've noticed that he was at a loss, because he stopped peeling the corn husk. "Keith?" He questioned. "You need help?"

"Uh-

Benji didn't let Keith finish, instead yelling across the house; "LANCE! Your boyfriend can't cook!"

Somehow, Lance had managed to appear in the kitchen within record time. "So—" Lance declared, his face triumphant. "I've finally found something that the great Keith Gyeong *cannot* do."

Keith rolled his eyes. "Please don't be immature about this. "

Lance giggled. "Oh, hell yeah I will. You, the boy with the straight A's can't cook. I'm never letting this go, I'm gonna rub it in all the way until you—"

"Shut up," Keith murmured, pressing his palm against Lance's mouth to promptly end his taunting. "Just teach me how to prepare this chicken before I slap you."

Lance chuckled and moved Keith's hand away from his face, instead leading it towards the sink. "First, wash your hands. We don't want Keith cooties in our dinner."

"I *already* washed my hands, this is just—"

"Wash them!"

Sighing, Keith did as he was told. He moved his hands under the running water of the sink, rubbing soap suds across his skin.

"Now," Lance continued, pointing at the large knife. "Cut the chicken my young padawan."

Trying his hardest *not* to make a sly remark, Keith grabbed the knife and moved in front of the cutting board, cautiously cutting the raw meat in thin, uneven strips.

"Like this?"

Lance shook his head. "You're terrible, no, here—" He moved behind Keith, reaching his arms around to grab Keith's wrists. Moving their right hands in alignment, Lance slowly moved Keith's hand to cut the chicken. It was a strange (and rather awkward) experience, especially with Lance's breath tickling the hairs at Keith's neck. Keith felt himself blush, every brush of skin on skin sending electricity down his spine.

"You have to cut them thicker and with even strokes."

Keith protested. "But I was!"

"No, you weren't! Yours look like little string cheese hybrids!"

Keith scowled and turned in Lance's arms, the awkwardness momentarily forgotten. "Um, no! I cut my chicken like chicken strips! That has chicken in the name!"

"Do you guys *always* fight like a married couple?" Benji called from the kitchen table.

Keith and Lance turned to look at Benji at the same time, both of them now reminded that they had an audience. A blush crept across Keith's cheeks, and he suddenly remembered the arms around his hips.

Lance swallowed. "Um...no?" "Yes, we do. It's just how healthy relationships go." Keith glared at Lance violently, a threat in his eyes that screamed; '*Agree with me!*'

"OH!" Lance's eyes widened. "Oh, oh yeah. Yeah, okay, fighting." Lance shifted into gear. "Fighting is healthy, we do fighting. Lots of fighting. Intense fighting, fighting with our mouths, fighting over clothes, fighting in bed, fighting in the shower—"

"Lance."

"-So like, don't worry if we start to beat each other up. It's 'cause we love each other. It relieves sexual tension."

"Lance!"

"What?" Keith let his palm slap against his forehead and moved from Lance's arms. "Just stop talking."

Benji stood up from the kitchen table with corn husks overflowing in his arms. "O-kay." He muttered, awkwardly waddling over to the backdoor with the husks. "I'm just going to leave now."

"No!" Lance tripped his way to Benji, flailing his arms to grab the corn husks. "I'm feeding the chickens. You make dinner instead."

"But what about teaching-"

"No!" Lance repeated, already stealing the husks from his brother, who looked personally offended. "Keith, come with me. I don't want you cutting yourself with the knife."

Somehow, Lance had magically found a way to maneuver out of unloading the dishes, making dinner, *and* having to deal with his little brother. Mrs. Sanchez was right, he truly was a master escapee.

"Alright, what the hell was that."

The two of them had escaped the kitchen just moments before, now walking towards the chicken coop in the yellow field behind the house. Tall, uncut field tickled at Keith's thigh through his sweatpants, the straw colored grass all the way past his knee.

Lance stepped over a fallen branch, his attention purposely pointed at the desert mountains standing high in the far distance. "I was helping you cook. You should know, you were there."

"I mean, obviously." Keith bit his lip, his gaze thoughtful. "But, like, your arms were around my waist. It was weird."

"Suck it up, man." Lance took a step over a stray rock. "It was a show for my brother. Fake dating is gonna include fake flirting."

Keith swallowed. "I guess that makes sense."

As they reached the chicken coup, a nasty scent wafted in through

Keith's nose. Looking through a wall of barbed wire, Keith counted nine chickens, all squawking loudly when Lance moved to unhook the gate's hinge.

"God, that stinks," Keith murmured while pinching his nostrils together. "What is it?"

"That, my friend, is fine cooked chicken shit."

Lance climbed into the shed slowly, maneuvering so that none of the birds could escape the barbed wire. "Hello, Ladies," Lance sang, clicking his tongue as he tossed around the corn husks. "Did you miss me?"

Keith stared in awe. "What the hell are you doing, man?"

"Giving the ladies some love," Lance cooed again, reaching down to hold one of the chickens and cradle her in his arms. "Isn't that right, er-" He looked down at a green tag that was wrapped around her leg. "-Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle."

A laugh exploded from Keith's chest. What fucking idiot named their pet chicken 'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle'?

"Hey!" Lance cried, slowly setting down TMNT so she could squabble off into a pile of corn husk. "Don't make fun of my children like that."

"Your children?" Keith questioned, disbelief in his voice. Keith leaned on his hip from the other side of the barbed wire, tapping his chin. "Who's the father?"

"You, duh." Lance said this matter of factly, rolling his eyes. He leaned down to pet some of the other chickens. "You're my boyfriend, and these are our children that we raised from infancy."

Keith deadpanned. "I have lived on this property for a total of one day, Lance. These feathery pieces of meat are not my children."

Lance gasped, throwing his head back with dramatic flare. "How dare you say that in front of the children!" Lance flung himself onto the chicken coop floor, flinging his arms about like a primadonna. "I am distraught, Keith! Distraught!"

Keith rubbed at his temples, groaning deep at his throat. "Get up, idiot. You're lying in the chicken shit."

"No," Lance pouted, swinging his head to the side. Chickens all squawked and chirped around him, some even crawling over his legs and arms. "I am one with the children. They need me Keith, they're motherless!"

One of the chickens, a brown one with a ID tag that said "United States Postal Service 2.0 ", began to nip at Lance's dark brown hair. Keith decided that Lance was way too comfortable lying among ugly ass birds. And, surprisingly enough, the chickens were comfortable with him too. Was Lance a bird whisperer? How did Lance even have friends?

"You're literally the weirdest person I have ever met."

"You love it."

Keith scowled. "No, I tolerate it. I'm getting laundry out of this." Keith pulled his hair into a ponytail with the sun beating down on his head, warming him up and causing sweat to trickle against his skin. "Now I'm leaving, this is too embarrassing."

Lance whined something that Keith couldn't understand, mostly because one of the chickens had crawled over his face. Just as he was about to turn on his heel and head back to the house, Keith decided to do one last thing.

"Smile!"

Keith snapped the fastest photograph he'd ever taken, capturing a slightly blurry image of Lance lounging in a bed of straw, surrounded by bug-eyed chickens. Then Keith was running, phone gripped tightly in hand as his legs pounded across the field. He could hear Lance screeching behind him, but his cries were muffled by the chicken's loud noises.

Keith only looked back for a moment, and a toothy smile spread across his face when he saw Lance struggling to leave the coop. Chickens screamed at Lance, telling him he wasn't allowed to leave. He was trapped, chickens blocking his way to the door and some of them racing around his feet.

"Fuck you, Gyeong!" Lance bellowed with a shaking fist. "You better not send that to Pidge!"

Day 2

Saturday, December 17th

6:10 P.M.

Dinner at the Sanchez household was a unique experience, to say the least.

First of all, Keith didn't even know they sold tables that fit more than six people. There were so many chairs, and even more were added in between the spaces for extra seating. Everyone was squished together, and food was constantly rotating around the table from person to person.

They said grace before dinner, which was something Keith actually did understand. He'd had religious foster parents, and this wasn't much different. He did let his eyes open once, and he'd peeked across the table at Mateo who waved at him.

There were always three conversations going on at the same time, but it was normal to be participating in at least two. There were more than two pitchers of lemonade on the table, and Josie had spilled her cup only five minutes in. There was a lot of laughing, a lot of noise, and a lot of something that Keith just didn't get.

What was it? Domesticity? Love? A sense of belonging? Whatever it was, Keith liked it.

During dinner Keith met Lance's father, Jaime Sanchez. Mr. Sanchez was tall and wiry, his old hands rough and calloused. His hair was graying, but not necessarily balding, and he wore circular glasses on the rim of his nose.

He was nice, Keith would admit. But he was also terrifying, just from the way Jaime looked at Keith. It wasn't disgust or anger that he wore, just frustration. Like a part of him wanted to be grateful that Keith was there, yet another wanted to politely ask him to get out.

Keith also met Daniel's wife, Rachel, who fed cooked carrots to Isabella. The two-year-old sat in a sesame street high chair, an old piece of furniture with the plastic's edges frayed and the cushioned seat ripped. Faded lines of blue and green color marked the tray, like at one time a young Lance had colored all over it in crayola.

Isabella liked staring at Keith. At first Keith thought he just looked scary, but later Lance assured him that his niece, Isabella, just liked

to observe new people. She was cute, if you considered orange carrot on a baby's face to be cute. She had a lot of hair, even for a two year old.

"So," Cleo began while picking at her salsa chicken. "How'd you two meet?"

The question wasn't meant to be awkward. It wasn't even a bad question, Cleo genuinely wanted to know. Yet it was obvious from the way Mr. Sanchez's neck stiffened that the question wasn't welcome.

"Maybe we shouldn't talk about Lance's," he paused, "...relationship at the dinner table."

Keith didn't understand why Mr. Sanchez was against this, against Lance and him. Okay, so yes, the relationship was fake. But the Sanchez family didn't need to know that, and something inside Keith made him genuinely angry. They may not have been *truly dating*, but that didn't mean Keith couldn't feel a sense of protection for Lance. Lance was his friend, or at least some variation.

The strange thing was that Mrs. Sanchez had readily expressed her acceptance and support for Lance. Daniel, Cleo, Rachel, Benji, even Josie, had all showed signs that they loved Lance unconditionally, regardless of his sexuality.

"Actually," Mrs. Sanchez began, looking away from her husband and towards Lance with a motherly smile across her lips. "I'd love to hear the story."

Anyone at the table could see Rosa and Jaime's tension. Rosa had purposely gone against Jaime's request, and it was obvious she didn't want to negotiate with him at the dinner table.

If Keith didn't know any better, he'd say the married couple had opposing views about Lance's sexuality.

Lance swallowed down some chicken. "So you want the story? Well, it's super lame."

"Good!" Benji slammed his fist on the table, earning a giggle from Isabella and a howl from the dog in the next room. "I'm ready to hear it!"

See, Lance and Keith had gone over this in the car ride. It had been

Keith's idea to make up a backstory, but it was Lance who did all the actual brainstorming. They'd decided to spring a story from truth, with a few white lies added.

"So," Lance began, setting his fork down so he could talk with his hands. "We sort of met through our roommates, but it's a lot more complex than that. My roommate is this kid named Hunk and—"

"Hunk? Seriously?" Benji snorted.

Lance flicked at his brother's ear. "Hey! Don't bash Hunk! He's my best buddy, and he's really good at drawing and chemistry. You never make fun of someone who's good at drawing and chemistry. Those are the two sacred arts of the universe."

Benji rolled his eyes and took a drink of his lemonade.

"Anyway," Lance continued, moving back into his storytelling mode. "Hunk and Keith are lab partners, so Keith would come over a lot to study. Now Keith's roommate is Shiro, and Shiro's like, super hot."

"How hot?" Benji teased, earning a slap from his sister.

"Shut up!" Cleo cried. "Let him tell the story!"

Lance smiled a devilish grin. "Hotter than Chris Evans."

This initiated a gasp from both Mrs. Sanchez and Rachel. "What!" Rosa declared, her hand near her mouth. "But Chris Evans is gorgeous!"

Lance nodded like he agreed. "Well Shiro? He's hotter. He's probably the sexiest man alive. He used to play baseball in highschool so he's got really muscly arms, but they're not the nasty kind of muscles? So it's super—"

"If Shiro is so hot, why aren't you dating him?" Benji pointed this out with a mouth full of food.

"Benjamin!" Mrs. Sanchez slapped Benji's arm lightly. "That is not respectful to Keith!"

Up until this point, Keith had been fairly quiet. It was now the prime moment for him to strike. "It's alright, Mrs. Sanchez." Keith smiled. "I already know Lance has the hots for Shiro. He asked him on a date last year, and got hardcore rejected. There were roses."

Okay, that wasn't part of Lance's fake backstory. That part was completely true, and did Keith regret bringing it up? No, not really. Lance's jaw dropped open so far that Keith feared it would hit the table. "Keith!" He screeched, almost toppling in his chair backwards. "That was a detail they didn't need to hear!"

Daniel leaned back in his chair and folded his arms over his chest. "Actually, I *definitely* needed to hear that one."

Lance bore holes into Daniel's skull, ignoring the giggles coming from Benji and Cleo's corner of the table. "Danny, I swear to—"

"Alright," Mr. Sanchez declared, getting up with his dirty plate. "Lance is doing the dishes tonight."

"What? But Dad—"

"No exceptions. That little stunt with the chickens earlier is gonna cost you."

Keith coughed into his arm to mask his laughter. Lance looked like a defeated puppy, watching with sad eyes as his father and many other siblings got up to place their dirty dishes in the sink.

"But I didn't even finish my story," Lance mumbled, now scrunched all the way into his chair.

"Boo-hoo," Keith teased, though he had a friendly smile on his face and his words were said kindly. "I'm sure you can tell it later."

Keith promised himself he wouldn't help Lance with the dishes. Yet, here he was, arms covered in dish soap and fingers pruny. He'd agreed to help, not because he was a nice person or anything, but because Lance was moping in front of the sink like a baby. Bottom lip puckered out, blue eyes big and watery, arms limp at his sides. It was annoying.

"Help me."

"No."

"Help me!"

"No."

"Help me?"

"Fine."

Everyone else had left the kitchen and dining area, most likely to put the children to bed. There had been no leftovers-Lance informed Keith that there never was any-and with Lance at the sink Mrs. Sanchez was left to her own devices.

Lance decided to turn on the radio from the corner of the kitchen. The station played an older song, probably set from the last time Mrs. Sanchez had used it.

"If you dance I'm breaking up with you," Keith muttered, scrubbing at a dish lined with salsa stains.

"I literally just turned on the radio. That doesn't mean I'm gonna dance."

Keith raised an eyebrow at Lance and said nothing, instead motioning to the song with his head. It was oldies. Definitely oldies, and not the type that Keith listened to. No, this song was a Footloose, West Side Story, Sixteen Candles sort of cringe. The kind that turned into *memes*.

"It's good though!" Lance proclaimed, and he began to move his legs to the beat.

Keith groaned. "No, no way. I literally just said don't dance, please don't do this-" He paused, listening to the song for a moment. "Is this Abba?"

Lance didn't say anything, instead rolling his hips in his slow travel towards Keith.

"No, no don't do that-"

In one swift motion Keith's hands were in Lance's, and Keith was pulled from the sink.

"*I've been cheated by you since I don't know when-*"

"Lance, don't sing, that's weird."

It seemed that Lance didn't care about what Keith thought. He gripped onto Keith's soapy hands anyway, tugging on his arms towards the center of the kitchen.

Keith tried his hardest to stand as still as possible. He refused to dance, there was no way in the world he would ever do such a thing. Dancing? With Lance? Especially in Lance's kitchen, listening to Lance's radio, Lance's Abba, Lance's house, Lance. Dancing with Lance. No way, not in a million years.

Except, watching his hips move was surreal. Lance seemed to know exactly what he was doing, his moves so completely effortless. It was such a casual dance, entirely simple and unique to Lance alone. And yet, Keith couldn't remember ever seeing someone move so gracefully.

Lance can dance?

"You can dance?"

He blurted it out suddenly, and his tone made it sound like both a question and a compliment. He was mentally banging his head against a wall, because no matter how badly Lance Sanchez annoyed him, the guy kept making Keith rethink. And this moment was one of those rare times when Keith looked at Lance, and for a moment he *wondered*.

Lance squeezed their palms, a smirk at his lips. "I may be an awkward, clumsy, annoying guy on the outside, but I've got some skills up my sleeve."

Keith swallowed down a lump of air, finding that it was hard to concentrate when Lance was moving so effortlessly. He moved his gaze to literally anywhere other than his dancing partner.

"Yeah but, why? Do the others know you like to dance? Hunk and Shiro, do they know?"

Lance shrugged and spun Keith around when the beat sped up.

"Nah."

And then he was moving faster. Even though it was meant to be dorky and ridiculous, Keith couldn't help but think it skillful. Natural talent, like Lance hadn't been to a single dance class in his life. Obviously Lance knew nothing about the waltz, or any classic dances for that matter. *He just knew how to move.*

Lance wasn't singing anymore, just mouthing the words, and Keith was holding back from hitting him.

" Just one look and I can hear a bell ring-"

Keith wanted to scream.

" One more look and I forget everything-"

Keith wanted to take his hands away.

" Woooahhh-"

Keith gave in.

" Mamma Mia! Here I go again! My my, how could I resist you?"

Maybe dancing with Lance wasn't half bad. As long as no one was there to watch him, as long as it was just Lance, as long as there was no judgment, then yes. Keith would dance with Lance.

And maybe, just maybe, Keith would enjoy it.

Day 2

Saturday, December 17th

9:42 P.M.

Spying on Keith and Lance wasn't something Cleo felt proud of. It hadn't been her original intent to pry, she'd only come down the stairs to grab a glass of water before bed. So did she feel guilty peering at them from behind the kitchen doorway? Yes, of course she did. But was she about to stop her spying? No, probably not.

She didn't consider herself the rebellious one of the family. That title had been bestowed to Lance ages ago, and it was slowly moving it's way to Josie, who most of the time thought it funny to play pranks, hide Benji's phone, and talk back to their Mamá . Cleo liked to think of herself as the responsible child, following Danny, whom the other siblings nicknamed 'the perfect child' due to his exemplary grades, law school scholarship, and american dream family.

So, spying? At almost ten at night? In her pajamas no less, body resting against the hallway wall. It felt ludicrous, and yet she was there, watching, prying, spying, smiling and giggling. What had made her stay?

Honestly? It was the smile on Lance's face.

Lance smiled all the time, that was the signature Lance look. He was a tease, a flirt, a dork, and a prankster. But Cleo was also Lance's little sister, she'd seen him struggle through thick and thin, watched from the sidelines as he attended high school, came out of the closet, attended college. They had pulled at each others hair and broken each other's toys, but at the end of the day she loved him. Cleo liked to think she knew Lance Sanchez. And she knew when he *really* smiled. She knew the difference between a fake grin and a genuine one, she knew him well enough to recognise when someone made him truly happy.

She hadn't seen him like that since before the Benji incident.

"You're stepping on my feet, idiot," Lance complained, though there was a giggle under his breath and that toothy smirk on his chin. The two boys swayed to the beat of an old eighties song, their hands intertwined and sooted feet moving across the kitchen tile.

"Not my fault," Keith countered, his gaze focused solely on his toes to watch for any mistakes (which he was still making, but whatever.)

Lance groaned. "Well it's not my fault! Look-" Lance grabbed Keith's hand and placed it on his shoulder, moving his own palm to Keith's hip. "I'll teach you how to dance, but you're gonna have to listen to me."

"I don't wanna learn," Keith grumbled, though his words were lost to the song. "But whatever, fine, teach me. But I get to lead."

"Nope," Lance countered quickly. "I actually know what I'm doing for once? I'm reveling in this moment."

The song ended and switched to a new one, an old song Cleo recognised but couldn't recall the name of. A distant memory of watching her parents dance to the song on a home video sparked her memory. It had been their wedding, Rosa twirling in a red party dress and Jaime in a casual button up. Cleo wondered if Lance even remembered it's tune. He must've remembered watching it on the old VHS player when they were kids, right? This was *her parent's song. And to share it? Keith must be really important.* Keith may not have known the song's significance, but Cleo was positive Lance did. And Lance hadn't stopped them from dancing yet.

"Let's dance in style, let's dance for a while, heaven can wait we're only watching the skies..."

Lance swallowed as the song's vocals began, now flustered with red on his cheeks. *Oh*, Cleo thought, a smirk on her chin. *So he does recognise it.*

"N-Now when you dance," Lance began, moving to the tune in a slow motion. "You have to count the beats. See? One, two..."

Cleo moved her head a little closer across the door's threshold, watching more intently. They couldn't see her, the boys too preoccupied with each other and the song to ever notice her presence.

After more of Lance's instruction, and a few minutes of beat counts, the two were beginning to get it. Keith stepped on Lance's foot again, and Cleo expected Lance to throw a smart comment. Instead he brushed it off, continuing his lesson like the mistake was nothing. The two of them were blushing, maddeningly so, and it made Cleo giggle into a muffled hand.

"This is hard," Keith complained, and it was obvious he was growing increasingly frustrated. The hand on Lance's shoulder fidgeted, while the other squirmed in Lance's grasp. "I'm doing it wrong."

"No, you're just new." Lance chuckled and squeezed Keith's palm tighter. The two of them began to move at a more casual rate, no longer focused on perfecting the moves, but instead just swaying to the song itself. "Didn't you ever go to a high school dance?"

"No one slow dances at school parties anymore."

"True," Lance agreed, though, and for a few more beats of the song they swayed. Then, ever so quietly, Lance questioned, "We're Slow dancing, right?"

Cleo watched Keith visible stutter. "Don't make it weird, Lance. But, uh, yes. We're slow dancing."

There was a pause. Lance let his eyes wander over Keith's pale skin, trailing from his lips and up to his eyes. Their two gazes locked, and as they danced their eyes continued to stay glued. Neither one dared to rip away.

"Is this alright?" Keith whispered, anxious about pleasing Lance.

Lance nodded immediately. "Yes." Again, that smile, that one that Cleo saw and recognized as absolute, as a grin that Lance only shared with the most worthy. "You're fun to dance with."

Cleo expected them to kiss, she truly thought that's where they were headed. The body language had all pointed to it. The moment was obviously there, the tension was high, their breaths were held. Lance looked at Keith expectantly, afraid to make a noise. Their hands clasped together even tighter, bodies suddenly closer, Keith rubbing his bottom lip between his teeth.

And then they broke apart, both at an awkward three feet away from each other. Cleo let a disappointed whine escape her lips, all before she squirmed again into her own palm.

"What was that?" Lance called out, the radio now shut off and both boys alert. Cleo squealed, racing as quickly and quietly as she could into the hallway bathroom to hide.

Once she was safe, Cleo leaned her head against the locked bathroom door. She slowly came down from the short burst of adrenaline, her body sliding against the wall and to the floor.

Why had they refused to kiss? They were dating weren't they? That's what boyfriends did. Cleo wasn't stupid, she had seen the movies, watched the shows, witnessed the relationships between her older siblings and their high school sweethearts. Cleo knew that Lance and Keith, not kissing, being awkward, blushing red faces, walking around each other, it wasn't normal. This was a crush, not a relationship.

What were they hiding?

2. Chapter 2

Day 3

Sunday, December 18th

1:06 A.M.

"Move your ass over."

Keith grunted into his pillow. "No."

Lance made a deep, overly dramatic noise at the back of his throat.
"Why can't you be nice to me?"

"Because." Keith spoke blankly. "You're taking up the entire bed."

"Um, no I'm not, I'm the one who just asked you to move over."

Keith moved farther away from Lance's side of the mattress, hoping that the two extra centimeters would satisfy him. At this rate he'd fall into the space between the bed and the wall. Keith could already foresee what an *awful* experience that would be.

"Is that better?"

He could hear the disappointment in Lance's voice. "Not really."

Keith couldn't take this. It was hot, he was sleeping on a tiny twin mattress, and his unfortunate bed mate was Lance Sanchez, the notorious bed hog. He missed the basement couch. *Missed it.*

In a spur of annoyance, Keith thrashed out of his crushed position against the wall and crawled over Lance's body to reach the nightstand. Lance complained the whole time, and Keith whacked at his protesting arms.

Once Keith flipped the lamp's switch bright light flooded the room. It was an eerie sort of light, making strange shadows on the wall from any sudden movement. Keith slid off the bed and limped to the closet, sweat sticking to his skin.

"What are you doing?"

Keith reached into the closet half blind, searching for any other

leftover blankets and sheets. "What does it look like? I'm making a bed on the floor."

"Why?"

The glare on Keith's face should've said enough, but Lance is stupid, and sometimes he doesn't understand body language.

"Because you're the worst bed hog I have ever come into contact with." Keith began to unfold the few blankets he'd found onto the floor. "And it's fucking hot."

Lance gave a sheepish frown. "Ah, sorry. My room is the hottest in the house."

"Yeah," Keith mumbled. "No shit."

Keith lay a few more blankets onto the floor before snatching a pillow from the bed. He was grumpy, Lance could possibly tell, and it didn't help that the time was past one in the morning. After a few more adjustments to his bed and shutting off the lamp, Keith finally flopped down onto his back and glared up at the ceiling.

Stars. There were glow stars stuck to Lance's ceiling.

Maybe it was his exhaustion, maybe it was the heat. Keith wasn't sure, but something about the glow-in-the-dark stars made his heart feel hollow. He'd never had stars like those as a kid, never had a permanent place to put them. Lance? Lance had lived in this house since he was a child. Lance had a place to put his stars. Right there, up on the ceiling that glowed above him.

Keith tried to close his eyes so he didn't have to look at the stupid things, and for a moment he thought sleep might just take him.

"I can't sleep."

Keith was ready to fucking *kill* this kid.

He let his eyes open a crack to peer in Lance's direction. Lance had turned the lamp on again.

"What."

He forced the simple word through gritted teeth, and he hoped maybe Lance would get the message that he was tired. Tired, as in

wanting sleep, as in wanting silence. And for him to turn the damn light off.

Lance sat upright. "I can't sleep, alright?"

"Can't you just close your eyes? What's the issue—" Keith halted, watching from a fairly pleasing angle as Lance began stripping off his old t-shirt. The lack of clothing revealed brown skin freckled with moles, and shadows from the lamp danced off his shoulder blades.

Keith gulped. "W-What are you doing?"

"Taking my shirt off?" Lance spoke like this was obvious. "I'm hot, I can't sleep with it on."

Lance tossed the shirt towards the laundry basket in the corner, missing entirely. He was completely oblivious to Keith's eyes on him, not finding the willpower to rip his eyes away. It was, in some ways, just as Keith expected. Keith knew what shirtless men looked like, he wasn't a virgin. And he could use his imagination, he was smart enough to guess what Lance looked like bare. Yet, looking at Lance like this for the first time still managed to surprise him. It was just so entirely *Lance*. The skin was unique to him and him alone, the tiny mole near the seam of his pants, the small dimples on his lower back, the faded blemish under his hairline. Yet, the one thing that struck Keith's attention the most was the large scar that ran across his abdomen. It wasn't a pretty sight, stitched up and pink, like there had been an incision in his belly.

"Do you mind me asking you a personal question?" Keith whispered, his lack of sleep forgotten.

"Depends on what you're asking." Lance moved to lay on his side and prop his head up with an elbow. At this angle Keith could observe the scar even more, and he noticed it draped over his left side. It looked so out of place on Lance's skin, contrasting the rest of his skinny torso.

"How did you, um," Keith bit his lip, debating if asking the question was worth it. "How did you get that scar?"

Lance's face paled, a gulp of air rolling visibly down his throat. "It's, um," He stuttered, fumbling up his words. "It's sort of, ah—" It was evident he didn't want to answer, or even knew how in the first place. "It's sort of personal."

Keith watched Lance subconsciously reach to cover the scar with his hand, as if he was self conscious it even existed. Keith couldn't help but let theories flood his mind. What was it? Why was it there? Why was Lance so self conscious about it? Was this something Lance had been hiding?

Keith pierced his lips in deep thought. "Alright," He muttered quietly. It was obvious Keith still desperately wanted an answer. Keith wasn't good with patience, especially when it came to Lance Sanchez.

Lance switched the lamp off again, enveloping the room into total darkness. Even though he couldn't see anything but the ceiling's glow stars, Keith let his eyes stay open. The two boys were silent, no noise except for the occasional ruffles of movement from the bed.

Deep thoughts plagued Keith's tired mind. This is what Keith did at night when he wasn't sleeping. Keith would think and wonder, making mental checklists, cringing at old memories, indulging in his fantasies, and dwell on his insecurities. Laying on the hardwood floor, staring up at glow stars, it all just added to his existential thoughts.

"We should play a game."

Keith wanted to smack his head on something. Wasn't Lance asleep? He'd been so sure the kid had zonked out. The silence had lasted so long, even Keith had begun to let his eyes drift closed.

"It's one a.m., Lance. Just go to sleep."

A small, tired yawn radiated from the blackness. It was cute, if you considered twenty year old man yawns to be cute "But I can't."

"You just yawned," Keith pointed out, talking to the dark room.
"That means you're tired."

It was like talking to a restless toddler. Lance was so vastly against sleeping when he was so obviously drained. Keith could hear more blanket ruffling, Lance moving around in the bed to find a comfortable position.

"Jesus Christ-" Keith grumbled, twisting in the makeshift bed. "Fine. We'll play a game. What do you wanna play?"

"I don't know," Lance mumbled into the darkness. "You choose."

"You're the one who wanted to play a game! You choose."

Lance paused for a moment, running different games through his head. "Well," He began, squirming a bit more beneath the blanket. "There's, uh-"

"There's nothing we can play. It's too dark and I am *not* leaving my bed."

Silence.

"How about twenty questions?"

Keith was prepared to refuse, until he realized that Lance's suggestion didn't sound half bad. It was dumb, definitely dumb. Twenty questions was a game you played on the first date, not between two boys who were fake dating. Obviously.

Still, it didn't require any movement, and it wasn't the lamest thing Lance had thought of. It was just questions, and answers, and getting to know each other. So he indulged.

"Alright," Keith agreed. "You go first."

"What is...." Lance trailed off into thought, searching for a question. "What is a nasty habit you have that no one is allowed to know about?"

Keith spoke without missing a beat. "Masturbation."

Lance screeched like he'd touched a dead animal, now whacking Keith with his pillow. "Keith! You can't just say stuff like that!"

"It was funny!" Keith giggled, his laughter dying down. "But yeah, that's my legit answer."

"So," Lance whispered. "You admit that you masturbate?"

Alright, so maybe Keith should've thought his answer through *before* mentioning masurbation. Keith figured he could talk about that stuff with Lance, that's just what guys sometimes did. Plus, they were buddies now. Buddies. Bros. Pals. Friends. Roommates. Fake Boyfriends. Fake Boyfriends?

Oh my god , Keith thought. I just told my fake boyfriend that I

masturbate.

Keith swallowed, realizing there was no backing out now. "Y-Yeah. I do."

"Okay. Nice. Same."

Keith wanted to bang his head against the rock hard floor. He wanted to do it *repeatedly*.

"Way to make it weird, Sanchez."

"You're the one who brought it up! I was just rolling with it!"

Keith rubbed at his temples, letting a soft, exasperated moan escape his lips. It was universal knowledge that people maturbated, and within this knowledge, there was a code to follow. And what did the code say? Never talk about masturbation unless you're with a bro. Or a lover.

And what was Lance? A bro? A lover? God, Keith feared for the day he realized which one Lance fell under.

"Alright, I'm asking the next one." Keith then muttered the first question that came to his mind. "If you could have sex with anyone in the world, who would you bang?"

Lance snorted. "Oh, that one's easy. Harrison Ford."

Keith yelped in surprise, immediately clamping a hand over his mouth when he forgot that there were people sleeping in the next room. "Lance!" He loudly whispered, remembering to be quieter. "He is seventy fucking years old!"

A giggle could be heard from Lance's direction. "No, not old Harrison Ford, I'm talking the young, Indiana Jones type of Harrison Ford."

"Oh," Keith replied, nodding at the ceiling like he understood. "Well, in that case, I would too."

"I'd probably bang Carrie Fisher too. And Mark Hamill."

"Just have a good ol' Star Wars Orgy." "It's not gay if it's a three way!"

"There would be four of you, Lance."

The two of them giggled at that, so much that Keith had to shush Lance so they didn't wake anyone. It was sort of fun, talking to each other while looking at nothing, sound as their one and only source of communication.

After a bit the two calmed down, and Keith could hear Lance roll onto his side. Keith wondered if Lance was looking at him. Even if he couldn't see, Keith swore Lance's eyes were boring into his skull.

"Okay, serious question," Lance began, his voice now quieter.

"Yeah?"

Lance scooted a bit more towards the edge of the bed. "What are you most afraid of?"

That immediately hit a nerve. Air hitched in Keith's chest, and he felt his stomach tie itself into knots. That was the type of question Keith tended to avoid, avoid like the motherfucking plague. Keith had a lot of insecurities, a lot of problems, a lot of emotions, and he knew that. Keith was not new to feelings. He could remember the nights in his room, high school calculus textbooks at the end of his bed, piles of laundry left unattended on the floor. He could remember crying into his pillow, rubbing at his eyes from the tears because there was just *so much*. So much unresolved conflict in Keith's head, so much that he dealt with in highschool. He remembered realizing he was gay and having no one to come out to. He remembered trying out for the baseball team and being denied. He remembered being bullied for having sex with the team's head pitcher, the same boy who gave him a concussion from just one punch. He remembered moving from school to school, home to home, never having a permanent family. Never having anyone.

Keith didn't talk about this type of stuff with people. He didn't, he never did. Keith was a private person, and his emotions and feelings were intended to stay a secret between him and himself alone.

So why did every fiber of his being scream to confide in Lance? Why did this feel right?

"Um," Keith started, feeling the knots within him grow even tighter. "It's sort of.."

"If you tell me what you're scared of, I'll tell you how I got my scar."

That caught Keith's attention.

Maybe Lance would keep his secret. Maybe he actually could talk to Lance about this sort of thing. Maybe Lance and him could become better friends through this. Maybe this was a good idea, maybe he truly did need to get his feelings out. Maybe...

Keith bit his lip and made a decision.

"I'm afraid of love."

Oh god. Why had he said it?

Keith hadn't realized he was holding his breath until Lance spoke.

"Oh," Lance answered, his voice lower than a whisper. "Why?"

The truth? Keith wasn't sure why.

He'd gone through it several times in his head, and every time he thought about it, the more stupid his fear became. Being afraid of love? That wasn't normal. Everyone had love, and to be afraid of it was to be selfish. Keith's fear had led him to many disastrous relationships, many emotionally damaging nights, many one night stands.

"I'm-" Keith stuttered. "I'm not sure why."

It was quiet again, that awkward silence between the two of them that lasted only moments.

Then Lance spoke, and his voice was the kindest he'd ever heard it. Keith wasn't even sure Lance had the capability to sound so contained, to sound so compassionate.

"I don't think you're afraid of love. I think you don't understand it."

Keith wasn't sure how to respond to that, and he wasn't even sure if he should. Lance was right on the money there, like he had read Keith's mind.

Lance continued. "Shiro told me you've never had a permanent family before."

Keith nodded slowly, and when he realized Lance couldn't see him, he spoke. "Er, yeah. I was born in Korea and brought to America as

an infant." Keith felt his breath hitch.

"And you were in the foster care system until you were eighteen?"

"Yeah."

God, this had took a depressing turn. Keith wanted to make a joke, and he wanted to make it *now*. Except, something inside him pushed against that idea. First of all, making jokes to cover up his insecurities just wasn't Keith's style. That was Lance's thing; yet here Lance was, actually indulging in a truly mature conversation.

"So." Lance continued, mumbling as if the situation were a puzzle, and it was his job to solve it. "You don't understand love. I wonder...I wonder if it's because you've *never been loved*."

Damn, Keith thought. *Who knew Lance could be so smart?*

Keith felt his bottom lip rub underneath his teeth absentmindedly, a habit he'd picked up when he was anxious. Keith wasn't sure what he was feeling inside, but a part of him wanted to talk about it. To let it out, to release the pressure. Keith had only been at the Sanchez household for a few days, and already he had things to say.

Keith dug his nails into the inside of his palms.

"You have the most loving family in the entire goddamn world."

There. He said it.

Lance sat up in his bed immediately, and suddenly the light was on, shadows on both their faces.

His eyebrows were furrowed in that signature Lance look, though they were more concerned than anything. Lance wasn't known one to be concerned, especially for Keith Gyeong. Yet the way Lance's eyes flickered across Keith's face made him feel fuzzy, like Lance cared. Actually, truly cared, like he wanted to wrap him up into a hug and never let go.

"We may be loving," Lance whispered almost silently. "But we aren't always like that."

Keith sat up as well, clutching the light blue blanket to his chest. His eyebrows were raised in question, and he stared at Lance, expecting an answer.

For a moment they just stared at each other, and Keith wasn't sure if Lance was going to talk or burn his face with heat vision. And when Lance spoke, Keith feared that he'd start to cry. Genuinely cry, his eyes were ringed with red and he kept biting his lip to force away emotion.

"Every family is different, Keith. Society says that in order for you to have a healthy family, it needs to be perfect. No fighting. No hatred, no anger, just a clean house and a nice car." He swallowed. "Being in a family isn't like that. Being in a family sucks. And sometimes? Being in a family is the best thing in the world. But the reality? Every family has issues."

Keith didn't want to pry, but the question slipped out anyway.

"What...what issues do you guys have, if you don't mind me asking?"

Lance sucked in a loud breath. Had Keith pried too far? Had he pushed Lance over the edge? Keith was beginning to regret that last sentence, and just as he was about to take it back, Lance spoke.

"Sophia got pregnant when she was seventeen. Sophia doesn't talk to us anymore. Sophia hates me and won't let her parents see their own six year old granddaughter. My parents have a bisexual son, and sometimes they fight because their son is a twink, because he likes men, because he likes women too, because he won't make up his goddamn mind between one or the other. Because they have different views, because they don't know how to accept me without hurting me. And-

Lance had talked so quickly, lips moving so fast that he took no breath. Keith realized that he was naming off issues, problems. Keith barely had enough time to process it all. But the last thing Lance said? Keith had never, *never*, been prepared for.

"And Benji? Benji had cancer when he was thirteen. Acute myeloid leukemia. That was the biggest thing, the most stressful, because it was no one's fault and we couldn't even *blame anyone*. It was just God, or science, or some stupid asshole in the sky. And it almost ripped us apart. He almost died, Keith. He almost *died*."

"Wait-" Keith gulped down this strange, new, painful information.
"He what?"

Lance finally looked down, as if trying too hard to keep a straight

face had finally taken its toll. He wasn't crying, just holding back tears. Knuckles clutched at his blanket, the skin turning white from lack of oxygen.

"Benji had leukemia. It spread to his kidney after a year of chemo, and he needed a transplant. We—" Lance swallowed. "We were lucky."

"Why?"

Lance pointed to the scar that ripped across his flesh.

Oh.

Oh.

Keith immediately put all the factors together. Benji was so skinny, no muscle and so sickly that he looked younger than his age of sixteen. This was the reason Lance and Benji were so close, the reason Lance looked at Benji and was *so proud*. The reason Benji looked at Lance and *saw the world*.

And this? This was the reason Lance always let Benji win their wrestling matches. Because Benji had been so close to death. And Lance would let his little brother win a thousand wrestling matches against him, just to guarantee that he'd be there in the morning when he woke up.

Lance had been Benji's donor.

Keith wasn't sure how to respond after that. The two of them just sat there, silent, on their respective beds, warm shadows flickering under their tired eyes. Neither moved, and Keith feared that even breathing too hard would cause a shift in the balance.

"I was only seventeen. I was supposed to worry about college, and finals, and friends, and being a stupid teenager in high school. Not whether my baby brother was gonna live another year."

There was obviously much more hidden inside Lance's mind, that much was certain. Keith wasn't going to push it, he wasn't going to ask much more of Lance. He was to give him time, let him reveal more memories and emotions as he pleased. But Keith knew a sad face when he saw one; he saw it in the mirror everyday.

"I was the only one in the family qualified enough to be a match." Lance confessed, tears finally falling from his eyes. "It's sort of funny

how that worked out. Benji and I were always so close," He chuckled. "Still are. I guess, I guess I thought that giving him my kidney would help in some way. So that if he did die, I could go on knowing I tried."

God. This night had started out so differently. Dancing in a kitchen, listening to Abba, playing twenty questions, and now? Now Lance was crying, Keith had found out every Sanchez secret there was to know, and Lance knew the truth about Keith's fear.

What a roller coaster this was. And it hadn't even been 24 hours since their drive in that stupid beige car, listening to Lance's ridiculous Kesha.

Keith wasn't sure how to comfort Lance. He wasn't always the best at that sort of thing, he'd never had many friends to comfort. Keith's first memory of ever being this close with someone had been freshman year of high school. Zoe, one of his only childhood friends whose father left the family, had cried into his shoulder often. She was so funny, green eyes, ridiculously curly hair, a little chubby, freckles that were on every inch of skin ever. He remembered watching Star Wars with her in his bedroom under the sheets. She'd kissed him during a school football game, and he'd ran away. Then he moved to Nevada to live with another family, and he never saw her again.

Sitting there, looking up at Lance cry, it reminded Keith of Zoe. He'd cared for her so much, and the moment she showed him her true self, he ran away. He couldn't make that mistake this time, Lance was too important. Even if he hated his guts, even if Lance made his skin crawl and his blood boil, even if sometimes Lance said the *stupidest things* that made Keith want to whack him with a baseball bat . Even then, even with all the frustration he held for Lance, he needed to show he cared.

Keith still had no idea how to do that. So he said the first thing that came to his mind.

"Can I touch your scar?"

Lance's blue eyes locked on Keith's own, and for a moment there was a silent conversation. Keith feared that asking such an intimate question would push Lance away. He'd fucked up, most definitely. *God, Keith, you're an idiot.*

Then, in only the slightest of movements, Lance moved the blanket

so that his scar was bare. It was like a silent invitation, and Keith realized that this was Lance giving him permission.

Keith hardly broke eye contact with Lance, even when he crawled onto the bed and lounged on his knees. They situated their positions, moving so that their knees barely touched and their bodies faced together. It was so quiet, so strangely intimate in a way that Keith had never experienced.

When Keith reached out his hand, he barely even moved. At first he went slow, fingers slightly shaking, and it was obvious he was scared. Scared of what? Not even Keith really knew. He was just hesitating.

Then, as if ripping off a bandaid, Lance gripped Keith's hand and placed it gently on the scar. Warmth laced itself against Keith's fingertips, and his thumb trailed lightly over stitches in the skin. It was rough and course, yet smooth at the same time, and the sensation was foreign. Keith let his finger trace the scar line, following the narrow mark like it was a road leading to nowhere.

"Alright," Lance whispered after a moment, reaching for Keith's hand. "I think that's enough." His hand was shaking, and Keith realized he was scared. Ever so gently, Keith grabbed his hand and held it tight.

"Hey," Keith whispered, holding Lance's palm to his chest. "It's alright." He let his mouth tilt into a crooked smile, though it was small. Lance nodded, and he wiped at his eyes.

"Life fucking sucks," He muttered, not letting go of Keith's hand.

"Agreed," He whispered. "My life sucks, your life sucks, I'm pretty sure even Beyonce's life sucks sometimes too."

Lance giggled. "I highly doubt that. Beyonce is a fucking goddess . She probably lives in the sky on a big ass cloud with wings and a crown."

Alright, so Lance was back.

"Um, no, that is *not* realistic." Keith crawled over to the side of Lance, slipping his feet underneath the blanket. "And anyway, if Beyonce was gonna live anywhere, it would be in a castle of gold."

"That's ridiculous! Cloud."

"Castle of gold."

"Cloud!"

"Castle of gold !"

Lance shoved at Keith lightly, and the two of them giggled like children. Keith stretched out in the bed and lay his head down on Lance's pillow.

"Hey-" Lance bellowed, looking down at Keith from his sitting position. "I thought you were sleeping on the floor?"

"Uhm? No? Why in the world would I do that?"

Lance raised an eyebrow. "I thought I was, and I quote, 'the worst bed hog I have ever come into contact with'."

"I did not say that."

Lance snorted. "Yes you did!"

Keith closed his eyes and snuggled up against the pillow, wearing a smug grin. "Nope, don't remember. I'm going to sleep. Goodnight."

" *Oh my gooooodd-*"

Fake snoring sounds erupted from Keith's nose and throat, and the childish groans only halted when Lance yanked the pillow from beneath Keith's head. Keith launched into a sitting position and scowled, raking his palms at the pillow.

"This is *mine* , idiot."

Keith reached for the pillow and almost fell off the bed, instead landing atop Lance's legs. Lance's long arms were too much of a match for Keith's short ones, and Keith rolled over to stare up at the thief.

"Why can't you be nice to me?"

"Because," Lance answered, pushing Keith off his legs and onto the other side of the bed. "You're a dork, and I am dork repellant."

Keith sat up and huffed, folding his arms over his chest and pouting like a toddler. "We just had a bonding moment! We soul searched

and shit!"

"So?"

"So be nice and give me the pillow!"

Lance moved the pillow behind his head and yawned loudly, the sound escaping his open mouth. Keith tried not to stare too hard at Lance's chest when he stretched into the yawn, or at the skin that peaked over the rim of his pajama shorts.

"The bonding moment is in the past, and I don't look to the past."

"You sir, are an asshole."

Keith crawled over to the floor to grab his own pillow. While leaning over Lance's legs to reach off the bed, he could've sworn Lance was staring at the length of skin poking out from beneath his shirt.

After a few moments of bickering, giggling, and a couple subtle glances (they really weren't the most subtle), Lance finally turned off the lamp and the two boys settled down into their bed.

Keith turned on his back to look up at the glow stars, Lance resting up against his arm.

You need to sleep, Keith urged himself. *Sleep. Sleep. Sleep.*

Except, after that roller coaster of a night, how could he? Everything ran through his mind, flooding him, suffocating him. He just couldn't do it, and he continued to think and ponder. There was so much more he needed to tell Lance. The kid had just poured out his soul to him, and yet here Keith was, keeping even more inside.

Later. He'd tell him later.

Keith listened to the subtle shift in Lance's breathing, and for a moment he was convinced he'd fallen asleep.

He was proved wrong with three little words, mumbled into the fabric of his pillow, as if spoken in a half conscious slumber.

"Count the stars..." Lance muttered, his eyes sealed closed and his body limp on the bed. Then he was out, truly out, soft snores rumbling in his throat.

Count the stars?

Keith looked to the only stars in the room; the plastic stickers that were glued to the ceiling. Keith wondered if Lance's last moment of advice would really work, if counting the stickers could truly get him to sleep. Images of a small Lance, only about six years old, entered Keith's mind. He wondered if Lance too had counted these exact stars, lying on the top bunk of his old bed. Maybe wrapped in a star wars comforter, a teddy bear tucked underneath his arm. If a young Lance could count the stars, then so could Keith.

One.

Two.

Three.

After a total of fourteen stars, Keith was out.

Day 3

Sunday, December 18th

8:37 A.M.

It was 8:37 a.m. when Keith woke to an empty bed, and in his groggy state, he panicked.

Mornings were always a surprise for Keith. He was never sure what kind of person he'd become when the sun came up, and often he was forced to roll with it. So when Keith's eyelashes unglued themselves to look at the ceiling that morning, he took in a breath of morning air and realized a few things.

One, last night had actually happened. He wasn't sure if it had been an insanely vivid dream or not, but the logical part of Keith's brain told him he definitely wasn't making their heart to heart moment up.

Two, he had slept in a bed with Lance Sanchez. All night in fact. And it was a twin bed, so there was a 90% chance of unintentional cuddling. Or spooning. Or both.

Three, Lance was not in said bed, which either meant the cuddling had gotten too intense and he had left to sleep downstairs, or that he was just awake and Keith was delirious.

Keith rolled onto his side in search of his missing sleepmate, sticky sweat and long red sleep marks tattooing his skin. He only found a wrinkled indent in the sheets, with lingering slobber stains left on the pillow. Lance, where was Lance?

In his attempt to leave the bed Keith tripped, eyelids still heavy and legs like wet noodles. His knee rammed against the bedside table, almost knocking off the lamp and shooting a pain through his sleepy nerves.

"SHIT-" He yelled into the morning, his first word very eloquent. "Shit, shit fuck shit-" He gripped onto his knee tightly, hoping the pain would subside. He let his body roll onto the floor, squeezing his eyes shut and clenching his jaw.

As the pain slowly disappeared, Keith's surroundings began to clear. Soft light faded through the blinds, and he noticed the door open a crack. Standing up and running a hand through his morning hair, Keith peeked his head out the bedroom door.

The hallway only held one sign of life; it was the offkey singing that echoed from behind the bathroom door. Keith immediately recognized them as Lance's horrible vocals; their long car ride had left an imprint in his mind that he could never escape.

"I heard that you were talkin' shit and you didn't think that I would HEAR IT!"

Oh god. Was Lance singing Gwen Stefani? In the shower?

Keith slipped out of the bedroom in his pajama t-shirt and shorts, making the short trek to the bathroom. The closer he got to the steamy door, the more he heard, and the more blackmail worthy his situation was becoming. Lance's phone must've been playing the original song, but Lance's rendition? Far better. It was loud, and entirely ridiculous, and it was obvious he knew every single line. How often did Lance even listen to Gwen Stefani?

"Few times I've been around that track so it's not just gonna happen like that!"

Keith's fingers went fumbling with the phone in his hand, hoping to capture the moment as a gift to the group chat. He opened the iphone's camera and immediately began recording.

Lance belted out the lyrics, probably confident that no one was

listening. Was he an idiot? Alright, Keith already knew the answer to that. Still, Lance had five siblings, he should know better than to sing such an awful song out loud. Someone could take the opportunity to use his vulnerable state against him. Just as Keith was doing now.

"Few times I've been around that track so it's not just gonna happen like that"

Oh God, Pidge was going to be so pleased.

"CAUSE I AIN'T NO HOLLABACK GIRL-"

Keith suppressed a giggle, amazed that he was actually getting this recorded, but even more amazed that Lance was *still singing*. How did he even know all the lyrics?

After a few more lines of singing, Keith reached out for the bathroom doorknob and realized it was unlocked. He smirked and turned the knob slowly as to not alert Lance of his presence. Camera still up, Keith slipped into the bathroom, his bare feet hitting slick tile. Steam surrounded the room and fogged up the mirror, and Keith noted Lance's phone plugged into a speaker by the toilet.

"Ooh, this mah shit, this mah shit-"

Keith wanted to laugh so badly, and it took every ounce of his self control to contain it. Just a little bit longer and he'd have a quality video to send.

"Ooh, this mah shit, this mah shit-"

Just a little bit longer. He needed something good.

"Now let me hear you say this shit is bananas- B-A-N-A-N-A-S, this shit is BANANAS, B-A-N-A-N-A-S-"

Keith couldn't contain it anymore, he was laughing, the camera was shaking, and Lance was screaming.

"HIJO DE TU PUTA MADRE-" Lance yelled violently in spanish, suddenly ripping the shower curtain open so he could poke his head out. Keith screeched at Lance's soapy mohawk, unbelieving that he'd caught something so great on video. "Keith? Keith what the FUCK-"

Keith was already out the door, laughing and sprinting towards the bedroom with phone in hand. Once inside he slammed the door shut and crawled onto the bed, his thumbs flying in an attempt to send the video to the group chat before Lance deleted the evidence forever.

Once it officially sent, Keith let his body fall back onto the bed so he could finally breath. Lance didn't enter the room for another

minute, a towel wrapped around his hip and wet hair sending water droplets down his neck and shoulders.

"You-" He breathed, holding tightly to his towel. "Are evil."

Keith focused his gaze on Lance's face, away from the sharp lines of his torso slicked with water. His scar was still there, and Keith tried his hardest to not stare for both their sakes.

So last night was real. It really happened.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Keith batted his eyelashes innocently. "You have a lovely singing voice by the way." Lance rolled his eyes. "Bullshit. Show me the video so I can delete it."

"I-"

Keith couldn't respond, interrupted by the sudden vibration of his phone on the bed. It signalled a text, and for a moment the two of them shared a silent exchange of wide eyes. And then Keith was suddenly screaming, Lance pouncing him for the phone with a loud howl.

They rolled around on the bed in a wild battle for the smartphone, kicking and pushing at each other. Keith's palm slammed against Lance's face in an attempt to push him away from the phone, squishing his enemy's cheeks and nose together in the process.

"You motherfucker-" Lance squirmed under Keith's hand and let several more spanish curse words slip, all that Keith didn't recognise.

Lance's long arms reached out in a sick attempt for the device, grabbing Keith's leg in the process. It was an amazing sight, the two of them wrestling, fighting, struggling against each other, both making high pitched screech noises that resembled baby animals. It looked as if they could wrestle forever, each of them a mixture of screeching, yelling, laughter and several eloquent curses.

However, it all came to a halt when Lance's towel fell.

In hindsight, Keith really should've seen this coming. Lance was in a towel, and literally nothing else. How had he not foreseen this?

And they'd been wrestling, Keith's hands had touched so much fucking skin that Keith was surprised he didn't have a hardon.

Scratch that. He definitely had a hardon.

And it didn't help that he was staring at a dick. Like, staring at it, the thing was practically eye level. He was staring at a dick. Lance's dick. Staring at Lance's dick.

Moments passed, and then Lance screeched, reaching for the towel with frantic hands. Keith scrambled to the bed's corner, now hiding his head behind a pillow. He held the phone tightly in his hand, deep breaths heaving violently from his chest.

"Put-" Keith heaved in another breath. "Put on some bloody pants!"

"I'm sorry!" Lance yelped while rummaging through the closet in a frenzy. "I'm sorry! So sorry! Shit!"

Over the top of the pillow Keith could see Lance's wet hair had been forced several different directions, half of it matted against the side of his head. Keith could feel warmth heating his cheeks, and his heart screamed at him for more air. Blood pumped fiercely to his groin, and Keith prayed to every God he could think of that Lance hadn't noticed.

"I'm-" Keith mumbled, slowly inching his way from the bed with the pillow still blocking his view. "I'm just gonna go downstairs."

In his escape from the bedroom, Keith didn't even look back, just sprinted towards the nearest bathroom and locked the door.

Letting his head rest against the bathroom door, Keith tried to control his breathing. Everything was wrong, so wrong. It had begun so innocently, just simple fun, and now? Now Keith wanted to fall off a cliff, taking every mistake he'd ever made along with him.

"Kill me," Keith breathed out to no one but himself, letting his pulse slowly deflate. For a few minutes he just stood there, leaning against the door, struggling to erase the image of Lance's dick from his mind. "Fucking kill me."

That image was nowhere near welcome. He wanted the image gone, more than anything in the world. Yet here he was, struggling to let his erection calm the fuck down.

This was so not part of the plan.

Group Chat: Lance is kinkier than Shiro

Members: Firelord, choke Me Daddy, President Taquito, Pidgeon, Hunky Munky, princess fukboi killer

8:03 A.M.

Hunky Munky (Hunk Maika'i) Said:

So yeah I love weddings guys this is amazing there is so much foOD
I'M DEAD

8:04 A.M.

Pidgeon (Pidge Holt) Said:

I am never getting married pls let me go to space and find a space cat to cuddle insted

*instead

8:45 A.M.

Firelord (Keith Gyeong) is online.

Firelord (Keith Gyeong) has sent a video recording.

8:47 A.M.

Hunky Munky (Hunk Maika'i) **Said:**

LMAO I should've warned you that Lance sings in the shower

It's

T err i b le

His other favorite is Intergalactic by the beastie boys

8:50 A.M.

Pidgeon (Pidge Holt) **Said:**

Keith I'm crying you're my hero

I'm saving this to my phone

Showing it at his wedding

one sec i'm showing matt

8:51 A.M.

Hunky Munky (Hunk Maika'i) **Said:**

Does Lance know you caught him singing

8:51 A.M.

Firelord (Keith Gyeong) **Said:**

um

no

8:52 A.M.

Hunky Munky (Hunk Maika'i) **Said:**

Broo

He's gonna be so mad

8:54 A.M.

princess fukboi killer (Allura Altea) Said:

Shiro is mad at you too lmao

He said

And i quote

"Keith should be ashamed of himself"

but i'M HELLA PROUD GOOD JOB BUDDY

8:54 A.M.

Hunky Munky (Hunk Maika'i) Said:

so? how is arizona? With the boyfriend? Having fun? :) :)

Day 3

Sunday, December 18th

9:08 A.M.

Keith swallowed down a spoonful of fruit loops and looked up from his phone, only to see Lance finally come down the stairs. The two of them didn't dare make eye contact, Lance instead stiffening past Keith on his way to the pantry.

Keith had escaped to the kitchen shortly after their incident, retreating in hopes that he could eat breakfast, text the group, and sit in his pajamas without being bothered. Benji had already approached him earlier (The guy had been banished to sleep in his sister's room and spent as little time in there as possible; hence waking up early) and they'd casually talked for a bit. Keith was terrified it would be awkward, now that Keith knew the truth of Benji's condition. Except, after Keith showed Benji the shower video, he found the young Sanchez boy to be as friendly and accommodating as ever.

Brother like brother, Keith guessed.

Now Keith sat at the island, half eaten bowl of fruit loops in front of

him, just hoping that Lance could be just as casual. He didn't want it to be awkward. He wanted his Lance back, the one he could tease and bicker and flirt with.

The two of them were silent, Keith watching Lance pour himself some breakfast out of the corner of his eye. He bit his lip, trying to look completely normal, like seeing Lance butt naked hadn't happened a mere ten minutes ago.

Keith needed to bring the situation up. They'd need to fix any embarrassment before it got worse. But did Keith want to talk about it? Hell, no.

"Lance I-"

Mrs. Sanchez suddenly entered the kitchen in her bathrobe, and Keith silently thanked God for the woman's existence. She could just enter the room and Lance seemed brighter, stood up straighter, color had even flooded to his cheeks. Lance was a mama's boy, and her presence in the early morning definitely helped brighten his mood.

"Morning, Mijo." Rosa stood on her toes to place a kiss on Lance's forehead, as Keith observed was her form of hello. Rosa was such a small woman, especially in comparison to her son, and the sweet exchange made Keith's heart turn every time.

Lance could've easily leaned down for his mother, but it was Rosa who made the extra mile to stand up taller. Keith wasn't sure what it meant, but something told him it was simply the sacrifice she wanted to make.

"Morning, Mamá ."

Keith turned his gaze away from the affection, feeling that familiar tingle in his chest. He instead looked towards the large windows that opened up to the fields behind the house. He could already see Josie and Mateo playing outside, screaming with glee as the kids chased a white goat around the chicken coop.

Rosa began the great task of brewing a pot of morning coffee. "So, how'd you two sleep? I hope you didn't make a mess of the sheets last night. I just washed them."

Lance was about to protest when his eyes went wide, the reality of what she implied finally hitting him like a hammer to the forehead.

The two boys locked eyes immediately, both of them wearing a vibrant, deep blush. They each seemed to launch into a state of panic, suddenly scrambling for an excuse that seemed fit.

Keith spoke first. "We didn't actually-

"Don't worry Mamá it was-"

"There was no sex, Mrs. Sanchez-"

"Obviously we had fun but there wasn't any *real* mess we couldn't handle-"

Keith choked on his own air. "LANCE!"

Rosa chuckled and swiped away some crumbs from lingering cereal. "Boys. Don't worry! I know that young adults like yourselves have sex all the time. I just hope you two are being safe."

Okay, let's get one thing straight. Keith never got the 'sex talk'.

His foster parent's usually assumed he'd already been given it, or had received it from his past family. So you must imagine his insane reaction when Keith, a young, twelve year old orphan, learned about the birds and the bees from Mr. Truman during his seventh grade health class. Let's just say that it was *not* the greatest experience in the world.

But this? This strange, impromptu sex talk from Mrs. Sanchez at 9:33 in the morning? This was far, far, *far* worse.

First of all, Keith wasn't used to being so open about sex with older adults. He was obviously comfortable talking about it with college kids; Shiro and him had swapped stories late into the night while studying in their dorm room. Spin the bottle and parties also existed, so Keith had his fair share of sex in that department.

But, second of all? Mrs. Sanchez was just so *casual* about the whole ordeal. How could she be so composed? Keith understood that she was older, and that she'd given the same sex talk to two other children before Lance, but this? This was still weird. It wasn't a talk against sex, it was a talk about *safe sex*. Which meant she thought they were having sex in the first place. Which they most *definitely* were not. Keith may have seen Lance shirtless, but they were *nowhere even close*.

Keith wanted to scream, or maybe go drown somewhere. It was obvious Lance was thinking the same thing.

"Mamá, Keith and I are, er.." Lance looked like he wanted to take the smoldering hot coffee right out of his mother's hand and pour it straight down his throat. Right there, right in front of them, like he was ready to accept death and never go back. "Safe?" Rosa seemed to finish Lance's sentence with a question, stirring sugar into her coffee casually. "I sure hope so. If not I might be forced to give Keith the bedroom and put you with your brother in Cleo's room."

God, her smile was so sweet. Too sweet, so much that it was beginning to terrify Keith. What scared him even more was that, despite her intimidating approach, Keith still wanted more than anything to please her.

Lance reddened even more, tightening his grip on the cereal bowl. "Y-Yes, Mamá. We're safe, I promise."

Rosa gave Lance a soft pat to his cheek. "Good. And be quieter next time? Josie came into my bed at one this morning, asking why there was laughter coming from your bedroom."

This time it was Keith's turn to grow a deeper maroon. The two boys just stared at each other, irises huge and jaws clamped shut.

Maybe it had been a bad idea playing twenty questions, especially at one a.m., with a nine year old sleeping right next door. Keith remembered how hard they laughed, giggling not-so-subtly into the night.

Keith wasn't sure if he should be grateful or completely disgusted. The family was now under the impression that Keith and Lance were sexually active, which added to the false boyfriend title. Except, now it made Keith feel like a criminal. He was living a vicious lie, especially to such a wonderful woman like Rosa Sanchez. It was beginning to turn his insides into mold.

Just two more weeks of the lie. Then Lance would alert his family of their breakup, and Keith wouldn't have to see Rosa, Benji, Mateo, or the cursed Sanchez family ever again.

The mere thought of leaving sent a violent pang at Keith's heart. He tried to ignore it.

Rosa gave a soft, hearty chuckle. "Oh, cheer up boys! I'm not angry."

She took a sip of her coffee and slowly made her way back towards her bedroom on the main floor. "Now, Keith, you need to get ready for the day. Lance is taking you down to the shop."

Keith straightened his posture immediately. "Yes ma'am."

Lance spoke through a mouthful of fruit loops. "Wait, I am? Since when?"

"Since now. Your father needs help in the shop since Christmas is next week."

Lance let out a low, throaty groan that seemed like a mesh between a whine and a cow moaning. "But Mooooom-" He started to protest, rolling his shoulders back. He was such a child, an obnoxious, six foot tall child. "I'm on vacation! And it's Sunday!"

"Well, your father isn't on vacation, and Sunday is restocking day. You can take Keith and work at the shop for at least a few hours."

"Yeah, but 'just a few hours' will turn into another few hours, and then a full day, and then another day, and pretty soon I'm working full time and-"

Rosa looked ready to whack her son, just from the stare she gave him. "You've hardly hung out with your father at all. Go down, move some boxes, work the cashier for two minutes, say hello to some of the neighbors, buy Keith some chocolate, and *then* you can come home and lounge around."

Lance sighed, and he angrily stuffed another spoonful of colorful fruit loops into his mouth. "Fine," He grumbled through his chewing. "But I'm only working the cashier for *two minutes* ! You hear me? I'm gonna set a timer, I'm holding you to that!"

Day 3

Sunday, December 18th

9:57 A.M.

"So, are we gonna talk about this morning?"

Lance looked like he was close to throwing up, and Keith feared that with them driving on the twisting farm roads he just might. "Um," Lance began, slowly making a left turn in his nasty car. "I would prefer we didn't?"

Keith scowled from the passenger seat. "Well, we need to. Because I don't want this to be awkward."

"I really don't want it to either, but I'd rather we just pretend it never happened?"

Keith was about to counter that, when instead he decided that maybe forgetting completely was a good idea. They could just forget. Act as if it never happened, like Keith hadn't been subjected to viewing his fake boyfriends dick. They could go on as friendly bros, wiping the awkward encounter from their minds entirely.

Keith swallowed. "Alright. Sure, it never happened." He turned his gaze out the corolla's side window and watched the dead trees spin past, an iron wire fence speeding across the window until it ended. "Also—" Keith began, turning away from the farmland scenery. "I'm sorry about the video thing. It was lame and—"

Lance raised his hand to stop him. "Dude. It's chill. Drop it."

Despite his blunt words, it was obvious Lance wasn't angry in the slightest. There was even a small grin on his face, and it made Keith let out the breath he'd been holding. The two of them easily shifted into their regular, more comfortable communication.

The ride into town wasn't too long, though long enough that the car started to heat up under the Arizona sun. Fuck it being December, they were in a desert, and the sun warmed their car despite the neutral weather outside. Keith ended up rolling down his window to let the sharp wind whip his hair back, and Lance made several snide comments about his 'princess mullet'.

While driving down the main highway, Lance gave Keith a long introduction to the town he'd grown up in. Mesa del Caballo was small, with a population of 1,208 people. Of those people, around 50% were over the age of sixty. There were only a few places of interest, ones that consisted of the town's fire department, a tiny diner called 'The Gingerbread House', a gas station, and a small store known as The Sanchez Grocer. Lance informed Keith that the town was cute, if you were into the 'small town girl' lifestyle.

Apparently, Lance was not. He hated the damn place.

The Sanchez kids had attended school in the next town over, and Lance informed Keith that his high school was known as Grossling High School (Because, according to Lance, it was so goddamn gross.) Keith could only imagine how many times that stupid joke had been told.

Lance also told Keith that the town was full of hicks, and was an absolutely *outstanding* place to live if you were straight. Which, as

Keith was fully aware by now, Lance was anything but. Keith chuckled when Lance told him about the older men that used to come into the store when Lance would work there over his summers. They'd ramble about politics and guns and tell Lance that he was a "Great young lad! You're so good to help your old man in the store!" .

Lance chuckled at that. "I only worked there for money dude. Summer job or whatever. And the old men had no idea the sinner I was."

As Lance described to Keith some old high school story, Keith observed the town pass by their car through the window. Several old houses ran past, followed by lampposts, cracked sidewalks, weeds, overgrown trees, road signs with chipped paint, and an ancient train that was no longer in use. It reminded Keith of something from a black and white western movie, despite the vibrant spray paint designs that decorated the rusting metal.

After a few minutes of cruising through the town's main road, Lance pulled the corolla into a tiny parking lot. The store in front of them was definitely one of the area's more prestigious buildings, the white paint not as chipped and the large sign on the front actually lighting up. Large price posters decorated the windows, advertising prices for cigarettes, fruit, firewood and other grocery store items.

The two boys hopped out and made their way through the front door, a bell's soft jingle announcing their arrival. The grocery store was fairly modest, not too crowded with only a few customers towards the back. A cashier stood with his back to them, and Keith recognized him as Jaime Sanchez when he turned around.

"Dad!" Lance called to his dad, giving a soft wave. "Mom sent me over to help out."

Jaime gave a soft smile, pushing his glasses farther up the bridge of his nose. Keith had noticed, even from his little time around Jaime Sanchez, that the man was far quieter than his wife, Rosa. Rosa was contained, that much was true, but in comparison to her husband? She was far more outspoken and friendly. She liked to voice her opinions, and often wasn't afraid to do so. Keith could already tell where Lance had gotten that from.

"That's wonderful, er-" Jaime then noticed Keith, and although the look on his face wasn't of disgust, Keith could definitely tell that he wasn't excited. Jaime was too polite to be rude, and he'd never kick

Keith out. But Keith knew when he wasn't wanted somewhere, he'd had his fair share of being unwanted.

"Great." Jaime added again, even if he obviously didn't think it was 'great'.

Lance sauntered over to the counter and leaned his body over the metaltop, raising an eyebrow at the alcohol racks behind the counter. "So, Dad," He began, his voice playful. "I'm almost twenty one. When will I get my first sip of alcohol?"

Jaimie smirked and moved around the counter to organize some food racks. "You and I both know that it won't be your first time with alcohol."

That made Lance's hair stand up on end. Keith hid laughter into his hand, trying to find something more interesting in the store he could look at.

Keith and Lance both had their fair share of alcohol. College parties and several keg stands sort of did that to you. The two had a past of shot competitions, which even Keith could admit was irresponsible.

Lance raised a finger to defend himself, but found his voice stop in his throat. Jaime just continued to smirk, unloading some oranges into an already growing fruit rack.

"I'll keep your secret, just don't tell your mom. Now take Keith to the back and unload the truck, Doug's waiting."

Lance escaped there are soon as possible, tugging on Keith's sleeve through the backdoor and away from his father. Keith laughed the whole time, teasing Lance for his flustered state.

The backdoor opened up to a concrete unloading area, several stacks of food and other products lining the back wall. A large moving truck was parked with its back rolled up, and Keith noted an older, balding man with a cigarette in his mouth. He reminded Keith of a dwarf wearing a baseball hat, and he wasn't sure if that was a good or a bad thing. The man was unloading large crates of food into one of the stacks, grumbling something under his breath. Keith only assumed the man was Doug, and the scowl on his face gave Keith a bad vibe.

That bad vibe disappeared the moment he saw Lance, who was waving with a large grin on his face. Doug plucked the cigarette

from his mouth and immediately crushed it under his foot, a toothy smile lighting up his cheeks. Keith didn't understand how Lance could do that; how he could make someone light up with one look.

"Lance! My boy!"

Lance grinned and pounded over to the older man, immediately giving him a side hug. "Hey, Doug. How's it going?"

"Better now that you're here. You helping?"

Lance nodded, slipping off his jacket and tossing it to the edge of the concrete. "Yup. This is Keith, by the way." He turned towards Keith, pointing proudly. "He's my-"

And then he stopped, and that proud look faltered.

"-Friend. Yeah, he's my friend. Visiting for Christmas."

So. Doug didn't know Lance liked men. This only made Keith wonder how many people actually knew.

Keith tried not to let the shock show on his face. Lance had looked so excited to introduce him as his boyfriend, his partner, his lover. Which, Keith couldn't blame him. It was cool to announce such things. However, they were also faking the relationship, and since Doug didn't know it was a relationship in the first place, telling the truth didn't really seem like an issue.

Right?

Keith shook away any strange thoughts and moved towards the truck, rolling up the sleeves of his sweatshirt.

For an hour the three of them worked, and even though Keith hated doing hard labour, it was nice. Doug had switched on the radio, letting soft rock play in the background as they unloaded the heavy crates. Keith ended up stripping himself of his sweater, instead leaving himself in a thin back t-shirt. Sweat dripped down both boy's necks, and every now and then Keith would let himself catch a small glimpse of the tan skin above Lance's hipline.

"I think you cheated," Keith declared in between gulps of his water bottle, referencing to an unloading competition the boys had (naturally) turned to in order to work faster. He wasn't angry that Lance had won, that was normally Lance's thing. He was, however,

slightly irked at how *cocky* Lance was being over his triumph.

Lance rested his head against the wall, shaking his head lazily. "No—" He took a swallow of water. "No fucking way. I've been doing this for years, pretty boy."

Keith raised an eyebrow at that. "Pretty boy? That's a new one." He tried not to show how much he enjoyed the new title, instead taking another swig of water.

Keith was too preoccupied with his water bottle to notice the blush on Lance's face. Anyone that wasn't stupid could notice the ridiculous red tint, or even the way Lance bit his lip and looked away to mask his embarrassment.

Except, if you were to find the most oblivious boys on the earth, it would be Lance Sanchez and Keith Gyeong.

Wiping sweat from his brow, Lance lead the way through the store's back door.

"God, I'm starving," Keith mumbled, staring at the aisles lined with food. He could hear his stomach growl violently.

Lance chuckled, reaching for a bag of chips and tossing them over. "Eat, idiot. This is a grocery store, find something you want." He made a crooked, devilish grin that Keith often knew to avoid. "Just don't let my Dad catch you." He giggled as if he was up to no good, which he damn well was, and raced off down one of the aisles so he could turn out of sight.

"Hey—" Keith called, racing after him. He tossed the bag aside, instead focused on finding the large toddler before he broke something.

Keith raced down several of the small aisles, not able to find Lance over the shelves. "Lance?" He called out, turning down towards the fruit section. "Lance where'd you—" He paused, skidding to a halt when he saw Lance crouched behind a crate of bananas.

Smiling, Keith followed Lance's example and dropped on all fours, crawling over to sit next to his partner in crime.

"What are you up to?" He questioned at a whisper.

Lance turned to Keith and placed a finger to his lips, signalling to

shush.

Normally Keith would've found the whole set up humourous, or at least childish. He might've even played along if it weren't for his pride. Except, this time? This wasn't one of Lance's naive games. Just from the look on Lance's face Keith knew something was wrong. His eyebrows were furrowed, eyes were terrified, bottom lip tucked between his top teeth.

"Hey," Keith began, placing a hand on Lance's shoulder. "What's wrong?"

Lance forced his palms against Keith's mouth, shutting him up immediately. Keith struggled against the skin, even tempted to lick the palm.

And then, Keith heard it.

It was Jaime, standing only a few rows to their right. The two boys couldn't see the man, but they could hear him. And that, that right there, that was what terrified Lance so much.

"I don't know what to do, Hank. I mean, I want to love him, I really do. And I still do. It's just hard when he," Jaime paused, as if searching for the right word. "When he's-"

"A homosexual?"

Keith gasped into Lance's fingers, his heart suddenly beating a million miles a minute. This is what had sent Lance into a frenzy, a terrified, fearful, irrational frenzy. This is what had sent Lance to hide behind a banana rack from his own father, too afraid to move from his spot, and too curious to move away.

Jaimie finally answered the unfaced man known as Hank. "Yes, a homosexual. He likes men, Hank! I don't understand why, and sometimes I lay awake at night thinking about it. I mean, we've dealt with rebellious kids before. Sophia got pregnant at such a young age, and now Lance likes men? He even brought his boyfriend home with him from college-"

"Oh, lord-"

"And I don't know what to do! I mean, I love Lance. He's my boy. I raised him, and I'll never let him go. Which makes this all the more harder, because I wish he'd just stop this bullshit already. But he

won't. He's been adamant about it since he was sixteen."

Hank spoke next, and his voice was coarse and rough, sounding out the vowels at a slower pace. He was old, Keith could tell just from his words, and everything those words said made Keith even angrier.

"He hasn't grown out of it yet?"

"No."

"I'm so sorry, Jaime. And you said he was a, what was it? A bisexual?"

Jaime's voice stuttered for a moment. "Y-Yeah. Which, in the beginning I thought would make it better. It means he likes both males and females. But now-"

Keith wrenched Lance's hand from his mouth. He wasn't sure what he was doing, but everything told him to do it. Because Lance needed to get *out*. He wasn't meant to hear this, listening in on something so painful was only going to hurt him.

"Stop-" Keith whispered harshly, reaching out to turn Lance's face towards him. He let his fingers linger at Lance's jaw, trailing the skin with his fingers. The two of their eyes locked, and Keith could see a red ring from under Lance's eyelids.

Please don't cry, Keith mentally urged, feeling a knot form in his chest. Please, please God, don't cry. I don't want you to cry.

"We need to get out of here."

Lance shook his head violently. "No." He wrenched his head from Keith's grasp, turning his head towards the voices again.

The voice continued on as if they'd never stopped, and Keith wanted more than anything, anything in the goddamn world, to save Lance from this.

It was one thing to know subconsciously that someone disapproved, that they hated something unique to you, something that added to the specific pieces of your very own puzzle . But to hear the person verbally declare it? To only confirm what you only *thought* might be the case? That painful, awful, heart wrenching feeling, that right there was what made people like Lance hate themselves.

The Lance Keith met his freshman year of college wasn't like that. He remembered Lance constantly flirting with girls and boys alike, wearing that smug look on his chin that had made Keith and Pidge laugh into their books. He remembered Lance boasting about his shitty car, and asking Shiro out on a date with flowers, and he remembered how Lance could *bounce back*. But this? This was what Lance had meant the night prior, the two of them huddling together in the dark, pouring out insecurities like it was nothing. This is what Lance meant when he had cried, no strength to even look Keith in the eye.

Lance's words from their night in the bedroom were screaming, echoing, vibrating across Keith's eardrums.

"My parents have a bisexual son, and sometimes they fight because their son is a twink, because he likes men, because he likes women too."

"Yeah," Jaime continued, as if answering one of Hank's questions. "I don't know what to do. My son likes men, but he likes women too, and that's stressful. I just want him to be one or the other, not both. Why can't he make up his mind? Why, Hank? Why can't he make up his goddamn mind?!"

Keith heard Lance's words again.

"Because he won't make up his goddamn mind between one or the other."

And again.

"Because he won't make up his goddamn mind between one or the other."

And again.

"Because he won't make up his goddamn mind between one or the other."

Keith shivered, feeling his heart vibrate uncontrollably. Everything inside ached, and screamed, and wrenched at him to *get out*.

"Lance." He whispered, grabbing his friend's arms and wrenching his body around. "Lance, we have to-"

"No."

"Lance, I swear to fucking God if you fight me on this I will-"

Keith felt his heart snap.

Lance was crying, actual tears streaming down his dark, sun kissed skin. He looked so broken, like he'd been given a reality check, like a child who'd been told that Santa was just a fantasy.

He needed to get Lance away from his father, and the grocery store, and the stupid town with only 1,208 people, and he just needed to get Lance *away*. Whether it be back to the Sanchez household, or to their university in Oregon, or to a goddamn diner two towns over. He didn't care where and he didn't care how far, Keith was taking him.

Keith would take Lance *anywhere*.

Day 3

Sunday, December 18th

11:37 A.M.

"Why does my Dad hate me?"

The question was simple really. Anyone who knew the truth could answer it, and Keith, someone who had just witnessed this full fledged truth, felt he should answer it with ease.

But did he want to answer it with ease? Not really.

A part of Keith felt like Jaime Sanchez truly didn't hate his son. Hate was a strong word, hate was the thing that fueled world wars and murder and discrimination. And although Mr. Sanchez had been disrespectful and horrid, some of the things he'd said still struck Keith a different way.

"I don't think your Dad hates you," Keith confessed, never letting his eyes stray from the white lines of the road. "I think he loves you, in some weird, twisted, asshole sort of way."

Lance wiped at his eyes. "Yeah, sure," He spoke sarcastically, like the notion was bullshit. Which, in Keith's defense, may have been slight bullshit, but still came from the truth.

Keith was getting the vibe that Jaime Sanchez didn't really think his

son was worthless. It was more complex than that. Jaime loved his son, loved his son deeply, and Keith had the suspicion that Jaime truly *wanted* to support Lance. But Jaime was also old fashioned, and confused, and a beginner to understanding his son's bisexuality. He didn't know what he was doing, having to deal with a bisexual son, and he was naturally going to others for help. They didn't exactly make a handbook for this sort of thing (alright, some do exist, though Keith doubts Jaime would ever read those.) Jaime reacted the way he did because it was all he'd ever known. Growing up in a religious household, especially with Lance's Abuela for a mother, had most likely set him to have black and white vision.

However, that didn't justify Jaime's words, not in the slightest. What he'd done was wrong, regardless of the intent or ignorance.

Keith wanted more than anything to protect Lance from his bitter situation. He wanted to save him, rid him of all his problems. Except, Keith was smart. He knew that was an irrational notion, because the world is a cruel, hideous place, and that's the reality. You cannot protect someone forever, no matter how much you care for them. Why? Because at the end of the day, you have your own problems, and they have theirs. Someday Lance was going to have to fight his own battles, and on that day Keith wouldn't be there to help him escape.

But, for now? For now Keith could at least be a support, a shield of protection for a day. He could keep driving, and driving, and driving, letting the car cruise at seventy miles per hour down the freeway.

It wasn't an escape though, not by any means. It was a step back. One that would allow Lance to make a better, stronger step forward in the right direction.

Lance had stopped crying a while ago, though the red eyes and puffy cheeks still lingered. Keith refused to look at Lance again, not while he was still in this state. Not that Keith was embarrassed to see Lance cry, their relationship had taken a strange and unexpected turn past that. No, Keith just didn't want his heart to ache all over again.

The silence between the two boys was masked by the car's engine, and Keith noticed Lance tugging at his shirt absentmindedly. Lance was all worn out now, the energy of crying, adrenaline, and emotions having drained him of every last drop.

Keith thought back to just fifteen minutes earlier, how he'd wrenched at Lance's hand and led them straight out the front door. He remembered how Jaime had seen them, how he'd cried out to stop, how *distraught* he sounded. Jaime knew he'd made a mistake, he knew he'd broken his son. He felt guilty, Keith had heard it in his voice. And had Keith stopped? No. Keith had kept walking, all the way out the front door, all the way past the soft jingle of the doorbell, all the way to their shitty car. All the way to somewhere safe.

And then Keith remembered how Lance had sobbed, how he buried his head into his sleeve so Keith wouldn't see, and how Keith had whispered, "It's okay. It's okay. It's okay to cry."

"But-" Lance had whispered, his lips red and chapped. "But it's not. It's not okay. I'm, I'm a twenty year old man, Keith."

Keith remembered how he'd pulled onto the side of the highway just so he could take his eyes off the road, just so he could stare at Lance and get his goddamn point across.

"Everyone. Fucking. Cries. "

"Y-Yes but-"

Keith had growled. "And you're a human. Crying is human. Crying is natural, crying is a part of God's bullshit circle of life. Are you an alien? Are you a cyborg? Are you some weird ass dude with no tear ducts from that anime shit you watch?"

Was this Keith's attempt at cheering Lance up while also proving a point, but like, simultaneously? Lance couldn't seem to decide the answer to that, or whether he should laugh or cry even harder. It just resulted in his tears stopping, and his jaw clenching shut.

"Well, no, but-"

Keith had thrown his hands up. "There. See? You've got no excuse then."

Lance hadn't been able to find a response to that, and when Keith drove back onto the highway their silence had continued.

And now? Now they were on the highway again, driving with no destination or plan intact.

After a moment, Keith finally spoke up. "Where do you want to go?"

Lance looked up and bit his lip, as if confused. "G-Go?"

Keith didn't dare move his eyes from the road. "Yeah, go. I'll take you anywhere. Do you wanna go home?"

Lance shook his head. "No, not yet. I don't want to worry my mom."

"Wait-" Keith's eyes widened. "So you're *not* going to tell your mom what your dad said?"

There was a pause, and for a moment Lance looked as if he was still debating. Then he finally shook his head. "No."

"Jesus Christ-" Keith's grip on the steering wheel tightened even harder, and his pale knuckles turned even whiter. "You need to talk about it with her. This can't go unnoticed. This needs to be resolved, resolved between you and your parents."

"I won't do it."

Keith huffed. "Don't be ridiculous! Hiding away your emotions isn't going to fix anything."

Lance turned his eyes towards Keith at a sharp angle, his voice growing increasingly more irritated. "I've hid my emotions my entire life, Keith. It'll be fine."

That wasn't good enough. Hiding your emotions only caused them to boil over and explode when a limit was reached; Keith had more than enough experience understanding that.

"Bullshit." Keith scowled. "You *need* to tell your mom, or I'll tell her for you."

From the edge in Lance's voice, Keith could tell that his friend was growing increasingly more irritated.

"I don't want her to know, okay? She doesn't need to know. She already deals with enough shit as it is, and my parents already fight over the issue, adding to it will just..."

"But, Lance, being a parent means that you're willing to deal with shit! Your mom-"

"Will you stop?"

Keith shook his head forcefully, making his hair sway. "No. Your mom will want to know! She's a good woman and-"

"WILL YOU STOP?" Lance repeated, banging his hands on the dashboard. "What do you know about parents? What do you know about my mom? You're an orphan, Keith! You don't have any parents!"

Keith felt the words stab into his chest, anger overflowing like blood.

Keith stopped the car immediately, swerving into a patch of earth on the side of the road. He parked the car, never turning off the engine, never even taking the key out, never looking at Lance once.

He was angry, one could tell from the way his eyes seemed to glow.

Keith wanted to scream. He wanted to bite his lip, and he was - biting his lip so *hard* that the taste of metal began to smolder his tongue.

Keith wasn't sure what he was feeling anymore.

On one hand he knew Lance was thinking irrationally, he knew that Lance hadn't meant such harmful words. When you were in despair, and anxiety took over, you tended to say hurtful things. Especially to the ones around you, to the ones you loved.

But on the other hand? On the other hand Keith wanted to something malicious right on back. Maybe Keith was thinking a little irrationally too, maybe it was the car's awkward heat. Maybe it was the fact that he was going out of his goddamn way to take care of Lance, maybe it was because Lance had just thrown him to the side and ignored the sacrifices Keith was making. Maybe it was because Keith felt broken too.

Keith *knew* he didn't have parents. Of course Keith knew, he'd lived his entire life afraid, and alone, and all by himself. He didn't need Lance fucking pointing it out for him, he didn't need this asshole reminding him of Keith's most painful insecurity. He didn't need Lance, a boy who *did have a family*, to brag and flaunt and flash it in his face! Lance had the *one thing* Keith would kill for - and he had the audacity to throw it away so blindly?

"You know what, Lance?" Keith began, his words vicious on his tongue. "You're right. I don't have parents. Great job on pointing that one out for me! You're *very* observant."

Without turning to look at Lance's reaction, Keith forced the driver's side open and yanked himself out, slamming the door shut behind him in a fit of rage. It was loud, the slam of plastic and metal only shattering the roadside serene peace.

"Oh, and by the way—" Keith turned and stared at Lance through the door's window, vexation oozing from his lips. "Go fuck yourself."

Keith wanted to go find a tree and bang his head against the bark till his skull broke. Keith wanted to go scream at nothing, he wanted to jump off a cliff, he wanted to punch something, or worse, someone. He wanted someone to feel the same pain he was feeling, he wanted someone to *ache* and to *burn* and to *bleed*.

Lance. He wanted to punch Lance. He didn't care about the guilty look Lance wore, or the round eyes that oozed with sorrow. He didn't care that Lance was getting out of the car, voice urgent, racing around with his tear damp sweatshirt to stop him. He didn't care that Lance repeated the words *I'm sorry* over and over again, like a mantra he'd memorized. He wanted to give Lance a bloody nose, he wanted to sock the motherfucker in the jaw.

So he did.

It happened so fast, and the moment Keith's fist made contact with flesh, all of Keith's anger seemed to slip away.

There was no cracking noise (Thank God), but Keith's fist still came away from the punch covered in blood. Deep, thick, red blood, staining and dripping from both Keith's fingers and Lance's nose. For a moment the two of them just stood there on the side of the road, blood dripping onto the dirt, staring at each other like they couldn't believe what was before their very eyes.

I just gave Lance a bloody nose, Keith's mind screamed, panic beginning to form. *I just gave Lance, my fake boyfriend, the one I'm supposed to be FAKE DATING, a bloody nose.*

What is Rosa going to think?

Keith began to back away, eyes wide. "Lance, Lance I'm so sorry—"

"Puta madre te voy a matar! Que mierda fue eso?!"

Lance was infuriated, malice painted across his skin like a Picasso. The words fell from his lips like spitfire, like vitriol. Keith couldn't understand Lance's curses, but he was smart enough to recognize the wrath Lance emulated.

"Coño carajo esto duele-y me hiciste sangrar! Eres un cabron de mierda! Quedate allí para que te saco la mierda, cojudo-Oye! Para moviendote de revés! Oye!"

Lance charged, and Keith was screaming.

Tackled to the ground with a shout, the two boys began to roll in the dirt. Lance tugged and ripped at Keith's hair and shirt, cursing loudly in wretched spanish. Keith continued to scream, pushing at Lance's face in his attempt to get away.

With a fierce kick to Lance's gut, Keith was able to scramble to his feet and sprint away from the scene, leaping over the road barrier and down into the forest area that lined the highway. He continued to screech, constantly looking behind him to watch Lance pound down the steep hill. He cupped his bloody nose with his hand, yelling out so many curse words that Keith was becoming increasingly terrified by the second.

"Keith! I'm going to fucking kill you!"

Even though Keith knew that Lance wouldn't ever kill him, he still kept running, fear spreading and his calves burning.

And then, in an almost humorous turn of events, Lance tripped on an old, spindly vine that grew out from a thick tree. His already bloody nose slammed against the brown earth.

Keith was too scared to laugh, and he took Lance's setback as an opportunity to run faster, leaping over a few rocks and branches, not knowing where he was going or in which direction he was headed. He probably should've been looking for landmarks, or at least thought through the situation *before* leaving Lance's Corolla on the side of a main highway.

The forest that Keith continued to sprint through was the type that people were murdered in, or the kind where you found a random cabin with an evil old woman inside. Keith couldn't help but feel a chill on his skin, despite it being noon and the sun shining through

the gaps of tall branches. The trees weren't exactly green, most of them bare or a dead yellow from the Arizona weather.

After a while of running, Keith realized Lance was nowhere near him. He slowed to a halt, dropping to his knees to catch his breath. He wheezed into the December air, sweat causing his black t-shirt to stick to his skin.

God, His mind murmured. I keep fucking this up.

After a few more breaths, Keith made the short decision to turn back and see if Lance was alright. However, without a single warning, Lance appeared from the bushes in a fit of rage. He pounced Keith, making his enemy screech in surprise. The two began wrestling again, rolling across the dirt and leaves. Branches poked into their sides and made sharp cuts in the skin, tree sap sticking to their clothes and elbows.

"I can't believe you fucking punched me!" Lance screamed into Keith's ear, raking his fingers towards Keith's chest.

"Of course I did!" Keith yelled right back, pushing at Lance's jaw and struggling to kick at his lower half. "You decided to be an asshole!"

They continued to roll and battle, tugging at each other's hair, shoving, pushing, scratching and kicking. This was so unlike their playful game on the bed from the morning earlier, this was violent and fearsome and, in some ways, a little childish.

As everything must come to a close, so must anger. So must battles, grudges, fighting, fury. So must the fire that you feel beneath your rib cage, so must the ice that burns your belly.

Their battle came to a close as all things do, and it did with a splash.

Cold liquid enveloped Keith's body, the two boys slowly falling into deep water. It was a huge shock, making Keith's eardrums pound and his heart race into overdrive.

It took a few moments for Keith to process that they'd fallen, somehow, into a body of water. Adrenaline pressured him into swimming upwards, forcing his body against the current. He felt water surge up his nose, ice cold burning like poison.

Lance yelped, bursting from beneath the water. The blood had washed away from his face, but was already beginning to drip from his right nostril again. Keith launched up soon after, exploding into a fit of coughing to hack the water from his lungs.

It burned, everything burned, and Keith felt like his entire body had turned blue from the temperature. Weren't they in a desert? Why was there a lake? And why was it *so cold*?

It was then that Keith remembered it was fucking December, and despite the warmer Arizona temperatures in comparison to other states, the water was still going to be cold. He groaned out loudly, his throat sore and aching from the lake water.

In a state of survival, both boys immediately swam in the same direction towards the bank. Keith struggled to swim with his limbs turning numb, his t-shirt and skinny jeans soaked to the core. His lips shook violently from the cold, already beginning to turn purple and blue. Keith forced his legs through the water, counting the seconds until he could finally be on the shore.

The moment he was free of the icy lake, Keith let his body flop down against the rocks and crouch into a fetal position. He was so cold, and he wanted more than anything to strip himself of the soaked clothing that clung to his body. He wouldn't ever do that with Lance watching, not if his life depended on it.

Lance flung himself to the rocks right after Keith, following his example and curling his knees to his chest. The two didn't say anything, just let the adrenaline subside and the cold ice their skin. Keith watched as Lance's lips turned a soft reddish blue, the skin chapped despite the water droplets that decorated the lipline. Wet blood dribbled into his mouth and across his tongue, staining his skin and continuing to bleed. For a moment Keith feared that Lance was going to lose too much blood.

Shaking, watching Lance shiver, letting his body grow increasingly more numb by the moment, Keith tried to process what had happened. So many things flooded his brain, and for a moment nothing seemed to make sense.

"This—" Lance shivered, letting his arms rest and soak the rocks beneath him. "This is the most fucked up christmas break I've ever had."

And then, without any warning and in his unstable state, Keith

started cackling.

"What-" Lance breathed through shivers, moving his head to the side. "What the hell?"

"You-" Keith belted out, attempting to speak despite the bursts of wheezing and chortling. "Are you, are you kidding me? This is the most eventful christmas break I've ever fucking-"

Lance scowled, wiping at his nose and trailing blood across his arm. "You're an idiot."

"And I, I fucking, I fucking punched you and-"

"Yes, I know. I'm bleeding because you're a lucky punch."

"And, and you, and you fucking-"

"I'm aware that I tripped on a tree, Keith. I know, I was there."

"And then? And then? We fell in a lake? A motherfucking lake, Lance! Like, what fine cooked shit is this-"

Lance groaned and sat up, cupping his nose again and pinching the bridge. Keith continued to cackle on the rocks, now rolling around in his laughter. Lance had never seen Keith laugh this hard in his life. And honestly? He wasn't sure if he liked this new, wild, joker Keith. Obviously Keith had lost it, because never had Lance thought that Keith Gyeong could actually laugh for longer than a solid minute.

"I'm leaving you," Lance announced, standing up from the rocks to shake some water from his clothes.

Keith's laughter slowly died down, and he struggled to scramble up from the rocky bank. "Hey," Keith said, racing up to walk at Lance's side, still in a small fit of giggles. "I'm sorry. Like, I really am."

Lance scowled and wiped at his bloody nose again, moving more blood to his sleeve. "Fuck you, man. You punched me!"

"And you brought up my dead parents! Never bully an orphan, that's like, the #1 tip on how to *not* be a dick." Keith ran a hand through his wet hair, slicking the black strands back and out of his eyes. "I'd say we're even."

Lance frowned and moved a branch out of his way. "Whatever." It was obvious he was still mad, but more grumpy than anything else. Who wouldn't be, soaked and walking through a forest, blood staining your shirt and face.

Keith moved up to stop Lance with a hand to the chest. "Hey, Lance. Let me patch you up."

"Why?" Lance countered, his words full of bite. "You don't want to."

With no warning, Keith immediately began to strip the wet, black t shirt from his body. The fabric unstuck from his skin slowly, revealing a pale chest lined with goosebumps.

"Yes, I do. Here."

Keith was oblivious to Lance's sudden blush, or the fact that his eyes went wide. Lance took the shirt silently, not able to rip his eyes away from the dip of Keith's belly button or the soft baby fat that lingered around his pants.

Keith had given Lance his shirt. For a bloody nose no less. How romantic.

Turning on his heel, Keith began to stride through the forest, whacking away at plants and branches with his hands. Lance brought the wet t-shirt up to his nose to apply pressure, letting it soak up with blood. He was still a bit in shock, and it took a while for Lance to move again. He'd taken too much time watching the way Keith's hips moved when he walked, the movement more obvious now that he was shirtless.

Despite being soaked, dirty, bruised, and just a little miserable, Keith felt at least a tiny bit content. He'd succeeded in helping Lance escape. At least, sort of, in a strange, unpleasant sort of way. Lance wasn't crying anymore, and he wasn't heartbroken over his father for the time being. That was a win in Keith's book.

After hiking through the roadside forest for a few more minutes, Lance finally spoke up. "So—" He began, still holding the black shirt to his nose. "How do you know where you're going? I feel sort of lost. I have absolutely no idea where the car is."

Keith raised an eyebrow, as if it were obvious. "You left a trail of blood, dude." With an outstretched arm, Keith pointed to droplets of red blood that splattered across several branches, leaves, and other

forestry, all of it creating a path north.

Lance gaped, finding the situation both hilarious and morbid.

"This is, like, a really fucked up version of Hansel and Gretel."

Keith snorted and continued to follow the blood trail. "Yeah, but the rated R version."

"Well, obviously." Lance chuckled into the shirt at his nose. "I mean, you've got your blood and gore, your reckless college kids, your homosexuals, filthy language, there was our violence earlier, one of us is half nude—"

"I am literally shirtless, *not* half nude," Keith pointedly interjected, moving a branch out of the way for Lance to walk through.

"—and all we need now is a hardcore sex scene!"

Keith laughed like that was preposterous, and he looked away immediately to cover up his blush. "Well, if we run into Han Solo anytime today, I'll let you know. Then we can have a *real* rated R movie."

That made Lance chuckle, and the way his eyes crinkled and his mouth tilted into a smile made Keith's body warm.

Things may not have gone according to plan, but looking at Lance then made it all worth it. He was smiling, really smiling. Even having a bloody nose couldn't bring away Lance's smile. And maybe it was Lance's natural survival tactic, maybe it was his form of coping, Keith didn't know. But it was worth it, worth all the shivering and the blue lips, the cuts on his skin and tree sap stuck in his hair, worth the screaming and the anger, all of it, just to see that smile on Lance's cracked lips.

They reached the corolla after several more minutes of walking, a trek that was mostly filled with crude jokes and Lance calling Keith, 'Gretel'. The bleeding from Lance's nose had finally subsided, and the two boys were slowly warming up from the movement.

Keith practically dragged himself to the car, never more happy in his life to see such a piece of junk.

"H-Hey, little lady..." Lance breathed, letting his words trail off as he hugged the car's front hood.

Despite being tired and ready for a four year long nap, Keith still had the energy to snort in Lance's direction. "You're insufferable."

Keith was surprised the car was still there, and just from one look in the window he could see their phones. How was the car *still* there, key stuck in the ignition, and not hijacked? How in the sweet hell were they still surviving this?

Keith climbed into the front seat and sat down, happy for once to be inside Lance's shitty corolla. He gave a content sigh, and reached for the key in the ignition so he could heat up the car and warm up his cold arms. He gave the key a full turn, and the car sparked to life for only a moment, before it sputtered out and died.

Keith's eyes widened, realization hitting him as he thought back to an hour earlier. He'd left the car on. He'd left the motherfucking car on. And now the battery was dead, and they were in the side of highway thirty-seven, and they were wet, and Keith was shirtless, and Lance was about to die from blood loss and hypothermia.

"Lance?" Keith called from the car's open window, his voice cautiously unsteady. "Do you happen to have any jumper cables?"

Lance poked his head up from where he'd been hugging the corolla's hood. "Um, no, why?"

Keith howled and pushed against the steering wheel horn out of anger. "Shit!" Keith yelled. "The car is dead."

"Well, fuck." Lance slid into the front seat and reached for his phone so he could text Danny.

"Six missed calls," Lance mumbled solemnly. "My Dad's worried about me." He didn't sound bitter, yet there was that same hint of sadness from before.

Keith gripped Lance's shoulder and squeezed it lightly, letting his thumb rub softly at the wet t-shirt fabric. "Listen," Keith began, tilting his head so the two could make eye contact. "Your father may be an asshole. He may have fucked up big time. And I may want to punch him in the gut next time I see him. But you know what else? I think he feels guilty. I can see it when he looks at you-he isn't angry. I think he's confused, and frustrated, and more angry at himself than anything else."

Lance bit his lip. "But what if you're wrong? What if he actually

does hate me?"

"I don't think he hates you, Lance."

It was as if Lance had ignored him. "What if, what if I need to stop dating men? What if I pretend I'm straight? Maybe I need to do that to make him happy, maybe I need to—"

In one swift motion Keith had both hands at Lance's face, squishing his cheeks together like a monkey. Lance looked like a baby, his lips puckered out and his blue eyes wide. Keith squished the cheeks in a little softer, but he still held his hands there. Lance didn't say anything, just stared at Keith expectantly.

Then, Keith finally spoke, his voice heavy and deep.

"No."

Lance moved to protest, but Keith squished his cheeks in even more.

"No. Never, never ever change for someone else. I don't care if that person is me, or your father, or the Queen of England. Never change."

Keith wasn't sure if he was the right person to give Lance this advice. He wasn't even sure if he deserved to be there, sitting in that stupid car, heart beating, feeling his own eyes begin to tear up, looking at Lance and wondering *how*. How had he gotten here? Why was this a thing? What had led him to sit in that car, hands on Lance's cheeks. Why was Keith the one there at Lance's side, there at a time when Lance needed love more than ever? It was like Lance's body needed Keith to survive, and Keith was there, happy to comply.

Maybe it was fate, or maybe it was God toying with their hearts. Keith wasn't sure, but what he did know was that he'd never been a religious person. He'd never known much about God, or angels, or bibles and churches. But what he did know, was that if God were real, if God truly did sit up in the sky on his throne of a cloud, was that he spent his time watching and laughing. He laughed at human misfortune, laughed at the world he had created, laughed at the things that he'd done. And Lance? Lance didn't deserve to be laughed at by God.

Keith swallowed.

"Never change. Because you are unique. And I know that's cheesy as shit, and I know this is coming straight from those chick flicks you pretend to hate, but you *are so fucking unique*. You're so, so..." Keith felt his breath hitch, like he was about to cry. Dammit, he'd never forgive himself if he cried.

"You're so *Lance*. You're compassionate, and friendly as hell. You watch anime, and can memorize any song you put your mind to. You love your chickens, and you love your siblings, and you love to wrestle. You love your bunk bed. You're sentimental. You're a crier, and you don't want anyone to know it. You're competitive as shit, yet you'll give up winning just to let your little brother feel victory. You're self sacrificing. Your music taste is the cringiest in the world, and somehow you still don't care. You can dance like Shakira, and fuck, you have the most *amazing* hips. When you dance?" Keith laughed, no longer in control of the words leaving his mouth.
"When you dance, you remind me just how gay I am. Because it's so *damn hot*. I watch you dance, and I want bang to my head against a wall."

Keith shook his head, laughing quietly under his breath. "Lance? You're bisexual. That's the reality. It's a part of who you are, just like all those other things. Those things you can't change, they're written into your DNA. So never, never say you want to change. And if you do? I'll kick your ass into the next reality."

Keith's hands fell from Lance's cheeks. It was quiet between the two of them, and Lance's face was blank, devoid of any emotion except shock. Keith didn't let it get to him, he just moved his hands away, placing them neatly in his lap.

Suddenly, like the world had spun just a little too fast, Lance was hugging him. Hugging so damn tight that Keith felt his bones creak and his muscles strain. Lance buried his face into Keith's neck, tears dampening Keith's bare skin.

For a moment, Keith didn't move, too shocked by the sudden act of contact to focus. And then Lance mumbled two words into Keith's shoulder, and it made his lips spread into a smile. It made his heart soar and his mind scream, it made little fireworks erupt in Keith's stomach.

"*Thank you.*"

Keith gripped Lance tightly back, wrapping his short arms around Lance's torso. The two of them sat there, embracing in the front seat

of the car, Lance sending tears down Keith's bare skin. And then they were pulling away, and although Keith had known the break was bound to happen, he wanted more than anything to be in Lance's arms again.

Lance wiped the tears from his eyes and chuckled quietly. "God, you're right. I am a crier. This is, what? The third time I've cried in front of you? And how long have we been on vacation?"

Keith smiled warmly and leaned back in his chair, absentmindedly rubbing his bottom lip underneath his teeth. "Only two days." Keith paused, watching as Lance wiped at the tears with his sleeve. "Man," Keith continued. "I made this really gay, didn't I?"

"Yeah," Lance agreed, looking back up at Keith with wet eyes and a sparkling beam of a smile. "But I don't mind. After all—" He paused, running his next words through his head like even admitting them was a great accomplishment. Which it was, and Keith was proud of him for it.

"After all. That's okay."

Day 3

Sunday, December 18th

2:17 P.M.

If Keith had learned anything in the past few days, it was that he needed to think his words through before he said them.

Normally Keith considered himself an intelligent man, which he most definitely was. He'd been a successful student, received great grades in highschool, and many of his professors enjoyed his presence in class. Still, there were times when his words got the better of him. Often things would slip from his mouth, and the moment he'd say them there would be a mountain of regret weighing down on his shoulders

Keith didn't regret what he'd said in that beat up corolla, not in the slightest. What he'd told Lance had been true, down to every last word, every last syllable.

Alright, that's a lie. There was one thing he *did* sort of regret.

Why in the living hell had Keith mentioned the hip thing?

"So," Lance began, his signature crooked, cocky smile at his lips.
"You think my hips are hot?"

Keith looked up from the floor where he rested next to Mateo, the two of them casually playing with Lance's old matchbox cars. He felt his ears turn red, remembering how he'd let that one slip in the car earlier.

Keith scoffed. "What? No I don't. What gave you that ridiculous idea?"

"Um, because you said it earlier?" Lance folded his sock covered feet beneath his legs. "I heard you."

"I never said that." Keith defended himself, moving his attention to one of the small toy cars. He made his red car crash into Mateo's green one, and the child giggled at the low engine noise Keith made at the base of this throat.

The two of them were in the living room, finally warmed up and no longer soaking. After Danny came to the rescue only an hour earlier, they each had taken a long shower, changed into dry clothes, and made up a batch of hot chocolate. Lance sat on the couch wrapped in blankets, a cup of the hot drink warming his palms.

Lance rolled his eyes, having watched his nephew and fake boyfriend play on the floor. "You totally said it, Keith. Don't deny my dance moves. Like you said, my hips don't lie."

"I said they were like Shakira, dumbo. Not that your hips 'didn't lie' or whatever."

"Aha!" Lance cried out, pointing an accusing finger at Keith at the floor. "So you *do* admit you said something!"

Keith groaned outwardly. Lance had caught him red handed, and there honestly wasn't anything he could do to fix it.

"Fine, maybe I did make a comment about your hips." Keith swallowed. "But it doesn't mean anything."

Keith could've sworn he saw a drop in Lance's face, a glint of sadness that erupted momentarily. And then it was gone, as if it were never there, and Lance was smiling again.

Keith inwardly cringed at his lying. *Of course* it meant something, Keith did find Lance attractive, but did he want Lance to know that? Hell no. His attraction was increasing, growing with every stupid thing Lance said, every joke he pulled, every crooked smirk he wore, every time they bonded.

Keith was starting to fall for Lance, and that was turning into a cold, hard reality for Keith. He could feel it, and his feelings weren't sparked by just the outside things. It was the vulnerable Lance that he saw, the things Lance revealed to Keith that weren't for outsider eyes. His scar, his father, his fears, his insecurities, that face Lance wore when he wanted to help, his dedication to his mother, the brotherly love he radiated. Keith was allowed to see a side of Lance that not many others knew existed.

Keith wasn't sure what this new attraction meant, and whether it would grow into something more. Lying to Lance about this attraction was racking at his brain. It was torture, because Keith knew Lance was only using him as his *fake* boyfriend, and would never want him as the real one. So yeah. Keith would keep on lying, denying his feelings, all because it would protect both of them. Hopefully.

It was comforting, sitting in the living room. Just an hour earlier they'd arrived with Danny, Rosa terrified and screaming at them in spanish. Keith not understanding a single thing that left her lips. He'd asked Lance what she'd said later, after they'd showered and washed in disinfectant.

"She was worried about us."

"Us?" Keith had questioned, confusion as to why he was included in the picture.

"Yeah." Lance nodded. "Us. Both of us."

Keith had been puzzled by that. "Why 'us'?"

Lance had patted Keith's shoulder as if he knew something he didn't. "She cares about you, Keith. Don't worry about it."

And now Keith was dry, and clean, and pleasantly comfortable. Rosa had gone off to the grocery store with Rachel, and so for the time being the two boys were ignoring their issues. Keith was okay with that. It was calm and nasty pond free, and Mateo was pleased to have another playmate besides Josie. Keith and Lance hadn't

mentioned Jaime once since they'd gotten back: it was a mutual agreement that they wouldn't even say his name until he came home from work.

"Okay," Lance continued. "But do I really dance like Shakira? Like, really really?"

Keith sighed and looked up from the cars, causing Mateo to pout. Keith wished that Lance would drop the subject, because he didn't want to go in depth anymore than he needed to. "Yes, Lance. You move like fuckin-"

"Keith-"

"Freaking," Keith corrected, having forgotten that Mateo was avidly listening. "Freaking. I meant freaking. You move like freaking Shakira."

Lance chuckled under his breath. "Good. You should tell my Mom that, she *loves* Shakira."

Keith raised an eyebrow. "Seriously?"

Just as Lance opened his mouth to respond, the front door creaked open. Jaime entered in, his eyebrows furrowed. It was pitiful really, seeing a grown man look so distraught.

Keith bit his lip and immediately looked away, anxiety pounding at his ears. He didn't want to make contact with Jaime in the slightest, not when he'd witnessed Jaime in such a negative light.

Mateo forced his toy car to crash against Keith's again, the small child making a loud explosion sound with his lips. Keith gave the boy a kind, almost sad smile, and he silently thanked Mateo for being there to play with him. Keith wasn't often around other children, and although kids intimidated him, Mateo was becoming a source of comfort.

Jaime walked past the living room archway, and for a moment he just stood there, watching the three boys.

"Lance?"

Lance moved his focus away from the ring of chocolate that lined his coffee mug, and instead gave Jaime blank eyes. Keith worried that Lance might blow up or become furious in his father's presence. Instead his face was void of emotion.

"Yeah?"

Jaime pushed his glasses higher up on his nose, eyes guilty. "I just-" He swallowed, it obvious that he was uncomfortable with Keith and Mateo in the room. "I just, um..."

Keith looked up at Lance, asking silently if he needed to stay by Lance's side. Lance simply shook his head, and even though Keith was worried, he also felt proud that Lance had decided to confront his father on his own about the issue.

Keith stood up and reached for Mateo's hand. "Hey Mateo, I just realized that I haven't met Cinderella. Would you mind introducing me?"

At the mention of the white goat, Mateo's eyes beamed. The child launched from the floor and grabbed Keith's hand, yanking him towards the back door. "Yes! Tio Lance doesn't like Cinderella, but I think she's nice. You will see!" Mateo tugged at Keith's arm even harder, trudging his way to the back patio.

Just as the screen door shut behind him, Keith made one final glance in Lance's direction. The two of them locked eyes, Lance looking beyond terrified. Then, despite his obvious fear, he smiled.

As soon as Keith was gone, Lance turned to his father.

"Papa-

"Lo Siento, Lance. I'm sorry."

Lance set his jaw as if he wasn't bothered, as if he wasn't afraid. Except, he was afraid, one could tell by the way he dug his fingernails into his skin.

"Espero que te sea de ayuda, Papa. But I do not forgive you." Lance paused. "You hurt me, and I am allowed time."

Jaime nodded like he understood, and for a moment he was silent. "The things I said," Jaime began, clenching his fists at his sides. "They were disrespectful, and not meant for you to hear. But.." He sighed. "They are how I feel. I do love you, Lance. But I'm new to this, I don't understand it or know how to accept it."

"You don't have to understand something to respect it, Papa. If you want to understand something, understand me, not my sexuality."

Being bisexual may be a part of me, but it isn't my whole, and it isn't the only thing that defines me." Lance swallowed, thinking back to what Keith had said, about how he'd helped Lance realize his own worth. "There are other things I'm defined by. I'm of Spanish heritage. I'm a Sanchez. I'm the son of Jaime and Rosa. But also? I am a bisexual, and that's just a fraction of my whole self."

Lance had never even considered saying these words until Keith had come along. Keith was the one who understood life better than Lance did. Yet, the more he thought about it, the more Lance realized that Keith made him stronger. They may have bickered, been rivals, competed and teased and prodded at each other, but in the end Keith seemed to balance Lance out. He'd learned more from Keith in two days, way more than the amount he learned in their six years knowing each other. Opening up, growing close, learning from each other, it did wonders in only thirty-six hours.

And now? Now Lance felt the words come from his lips with ease, never faltering, his voice clear and precise. He knew the point he was making, he knew his own feelings, and it was time to actually let them out.

"All I want is your respect and your support. You don't *need* to understand it. Just understand that it's real, and that I never changed, and that I'm still your son. Being bisexual doesn't mean I'm a new person, Papa. It simply means I love more than one gender."

Lance pierced his lips at a close, signalling he was finished. It was silent between father and son, both of them still and holding their breath. Lance began to fear that his father would be angry, that he'd protest or become angered.

But, to Lance's surprise, his father began to cry.

Now, it is a strange sight to see a parent cry. From the moment you are born you see your parents as the ultimate human example, because they're some of the first people you see. They are the fine example of life, because they are your ultimate teacher, and act as your main source of learning.

However, often there are stereotypes pushed, ideals that are forced, things read in between the lines. These are things that say your parents must love you no matter what; yet sometimes they don't. They say your parents must love each other; and sometimes they don't. They say your family must be completely perfect in order to

be happy- that is a lie. They say that the father is the protector, that he cannot cry; this is also a lie. Society forgets reality, it forgets what humans are really like.

Human's must cry. Keith had told Lance this many times, so much that Lance promised he'd never, never forget it. Still, to see a father weep like Jaime was? It is an experience far different than any other.

First of all, it's uncomfortable, and that's the cold hard truth. You are seeing them in a vulnerable state, already breaking the gender stereotypes of the typical man. And is this okay? Yes, it is always okay.

Second of all, it is eye opening. Because, as society deems, men cannot cry. But as Lance had learned, that is bullshit. Crying happens to everyone, regardless of the gender, and it is one of the ultimate symbols of human emotion. It can convey so many things. Happiness. Love. Anger. Sadness. Hurt. And sometimes, a mixture of all five.

That's why Jaime was crying. It was raw emotion, and it was the tears that made Lance reach for his father and hold him.

Such a strange image, to see a child comfort a parent.

Jaime was sad, sad because he had wronged his son, because he'd made a mistake that he couldn't rewind. He was guilty, because he wanted more than anything to take what he'd said away. There was anger, because he was angry with himself, but also the world, and also his lack of understanding. And confusion, because he was going against what he'd been brainwashed to learn as a child. And finally there was happiness, because he was *proud*. Proud to call Lance his son, and proud that his son had a mind of his own.

So as Lance stood there in the living room, socks on his feet and arms around his father, Lance realized something. It was going to take time for Jaime to understand, and he'd continue to struggle and protest. You couldn't flip a switch on this sort of thing, you couldn't automatically fix a person. But you could have patience, and although Lance didn't consider himself a patient person in the slightest, he was still willing to wait.

And although he hadn't fully forgiven his father, and although he was still hurt inside, Lance realized that he could forgive. Not today, he decided. But someday.

3. Chapter 3

Day 5

Tuesday, December 20th

1:15 P.M.

Two days went by.

Two days came and went since Keith and Lance's bloody nose incident, and of those three days, Keith had learned a lot from the Sanchez household. He'd learned a few spanish words, ones that Benji taught him while laying their backs flat against the grassy field. Lance and Benji giggled when Keith pronounced the words wrong, and they chuckled even more when they told him forbidden profanities that were never (never) permitted in front of Mamá .

Keith had also learned what a 'chore chart' was.

First of all, he didn't even know that such a thing existed until he'd come to Arizona. It was, in his opinion, entirely lame, but also effective. It was a laminated chart posted to their fridge, each of the kid's names highlighted in different colors. It looked like something off pinterest, which made Keith cringe horrifically and refuse to partake. But, after a few days of being a guest in the Sanchez household, and quietly whining to Lance, he was officially added to the chart using a half dead whiteboard marker.

Keith also discovered that Lance wasn't the only good dancer in the family. Dancing must've been a family gene, because he'd already witnessed Rosa and Lance dance together in the kitchen three times. Rosa liked to listen to music while she cooked, hence the radio, and often she would sway her hips while stirring soup, cutting carrots, or washing dishes. Keith had caught her singing the spanish lyrics right along with the music, often Lance or Danny joining in. Danny also liked to dance, sometimes grabbing Josie and swinging her up into his arms, making her scream into a fit of giggles. And Mateo? Even Mateo danced, even if it was awkward hip shaking and offkey power ranger punches to the air when the bass hit.

And then there were the animals.

Keith wouldn't dare go near the goat, mainly out of fear that Cinderella would bite him or tear at his skinny jeans. The iguana

was alright, though he'd found it in his bed two more times and had almost screamed when finding the reptile lounging in a bathtub. The dog, a large boxer named Terminator, was fun to play catch with, even if the ball always came back covered in slobber. The chickens were annoying, but Keith was willing to actually enter the coop now to help feed them. They also had a cat, though it was a stray and the family had no knowledge where he'd come from. The cat came and went as he pleased, pouncing on mice in the field and drinking the dog's water when he wasn't looking. His name was Lord Voldemort, named for his scrunched nose and dark fur. Lance called him 'Morty' for short, and strangely enough the name had caught on.

There were also children. *So many children.*

In reality there wasn't that many. Only three, but it often felt like three hundred. Josie and Mateo only ever had two modes; getting along, and getting the motherfucking fight on. If they weren't totally engulfed in playing together, then they were engulfed in fighting against each other. And if there was a moment of peace, then Isabella was screaming.

Keith wasn't sure what to think about Isabella. Lance loved her dearly, he called her "Baby Bella" and liked to dance with her resting at his hip. She also liked to pat his cheeks lightly, as if she were saying hello, and Lance would often tap her cheeks back with his pointer finger. The two year old could only say a few words, most of them mumbled into a mixture of sounds. She called both Lance and Benji 'Tio', as it was an easy word to pronounce, though it got confusing when differentiating the two boys.

And if Keith thought three children was too many? Lance had chuckled, reminding Keith that Christmas Eve would bring around twelve more. Lance had many cousins, three in California, two in Phoenix, four in Tucson, a couple near the Utah/Arizona border, and the rest all the way in Mexico. Not all would be able to attend the family christmas gathering, but enough that it would be a wild event. Lance informed Keith that the family always met at Rosa and Jaime's home for convenience of the large fields and spacious home.

Keith was beginning to enjoy his stay at the Sanchez household. Despite the foreign sounds, smells, and overload of other senses, Keith found the house's overly loving aura to be a comfort. The house wasn't always clean (if anything it never was, there were always toys to be put away, laundry piles to be folded, spills to be mopped up), and it only added to the family sensation.

Keith enjoyed being around Rosa and the others. Rachel, Lance's sister-in-law, was a riot to be around. She was a kid at heart, throwing puns and laughing at every joke Lance made.

Out of all the family members, Keith was thankfully not required to make a lot of contact with Jaime, and they usually only spoke at the dinner table or on the off chance that he ran into him before he left for work.

However, that all came to a change when Rosa instigated *the date idea*.

Or, as Lance called it, the 'Worst fucking idea my mom has ever had since she tried mario kart and failed' idea. Bad Date Plan for short.

Keith and Rosa were folding laundry on the couch when she mentioned it. Lance had lounged across the floor, skipping through channel after channel on the TV, indecisive and testing his mother's patience.

"Mom-" Lance whined, skipping through several shows that Keith thought would've been fine to watch, but had been automatically vetoed by Lance. "There's nothing to do!"

Rosa grabbed a pile of unfolded underwear from the laundry basket and tossed them in Lance's direction. ";Parate, huevon! There's plenty to do! You've got a long list of chores and your boyfriend is doing one of them." She emphasized the word boyfriend, nodding in the direction of Keith to her right who was, in fact, doing Lance's laundry chores.

Keith gave Lance a smug smirk with a wrinkled nose, tossing red boxers at Lance's head and missing. "Fold your own underwear, nerd. It's nasty."

Lance groaned, practically rolling up from the floor like a noodle. "You're such a kiss up. And it's not nasty," Lance paused, wearing that crooked grin that Keith knew all too well. "It's not like you haven't seen it before."

"Well yeah but-" Keith turned red, eyes practically popped out of their sockets with the realization of Lance's words.

"Come on, Keith. I thought you liked me in my underwear."

What did Lance mean by that? Hell, Keith knew exactly what he

meant. He was insinuating sex. He was doing it in front of his mother too! He was talking about sex, in front of Rosa, making an innuendo, in front of Rosa, talking about their *non-existent, fake, pretend sex lives*, in front of Rosa, wiggling his eyebrows seductively, *in front of Rosa?*

Was he trying to get murdered?

Rosa whipped Lance with an unfolded towel. "Lance!" Rosa cried, looking ready to whack him again. "*¡No seas asqueros!* I'm your mother, don't talk about that stuff around me." The woman went back to folding her clothes, placing some of Josie's shirts into a neat pile.

Lance gaped, throwing his hands in the air. "What?! But you're the one who gave Keith and I the safe sex talk a couple days ago! You can't just, like, give the sex talk then dismiss my sexual jo—"

"When's the last time you boys went on a date?"

Her words were like a brick wall, blunt and straight to the issue. Both boys had their mouths snap shut, each staring with wide eyes.

"Um..." Keith began, not moving a muscle, though slowly looking to Lance for help. A date! A date? They'd never been on a bloody date. They weren't even dating for fuck's sake.

"We, uh..." Lance rubbed at the back of his neck looking sheepish at his mother. "We've gone to a couple movies, I guess?"

Rosa folded her arms over a chest. "Really? And what movies?"

Lance turned to Keith, eyes wide as if to say 'your turn.'

"We've seen, er," Keith's mind scrambled to think of the movies that had just barely come out. "Star Wars. Yeah, Star Wars."

Rosa didn't move except for raising her eyebrows in question. "Star Wars. The one that came out, what, last year?"

Lance bit his lip. "We, uh, we don't get out much."

Rosa sighed and threw her head back, slouching against the couch cushions. "So you boys are telling me that you don't ever go on dates? And all you have is sex?"

Alarms started screeching in both the boy's ears, each giving the other a look of horror. They were fucking this up, and continuing to fuck it up, and if they didn't act soon their fake relationship would be fucked up *forever*.

It was either agree to her question or submit to defeat.

"...yes?"

Rosa squared her jaw and stood up straight, looking both furious and, well, excited?

"You know what!" She proclaimed loudly, popping her fist in the air. "I won't have it. We're going on a double date. It'll be you two, plus your father and I."

Both boy's jaws dropped, and their thought process was practically the same in reaction.

Hell. No.

"Mamá !" Lance cried, shaking his head violently. "No! No, no no no no, please don't subject me to this torture-"

Rosa clapped her hands together in exclamation. "Yes! A double date! What a great idea!"

Keith wasn't sure how to respond, especially since he would never talk back to Rosa. He had too much respect for the woman, and any attempt to disrespect her would kill Keith inside.

Lance, however, had other plans.

He wasn't disrespectful, not at all. He was just Rosa's middle child, and that meant complaining. And whining. Plain and simple.

"Mamá , Mamá pleeeeaaase don't make me go on a double date with you. It'll look like my parents are taking their son out with his playmate."

Rosa scrunched her nose and stood up from the couch, only to play her hands haughtily at her hips. "Would it feel better if it was a triple date? Group date? We could invite danny and Rachel."

Lance's eyes widened in horror. "Oh, hell n-"

"Yes!" Keith announced sharply, cutting Lance off entirely. "Yes. Yes we will go on a group date with you."

Lance turned around to stare at Keith, his eyes pained. Like, really pained, like his eyeballs had been stabbed with toothpicks.

"What," He whispered behind his hand, as if his Mom couldn't hear from two feet away. "What in the actual fuck are you doing?"

Keith gave a blank, deadpan stare. "Agreeing with your mother."

"But, why?!"

Keith suddenly gritted through his teeth forcefully, hiding behind a hand. "It's a good idea. We're fake dating, right? Or did you forget?"

Keith turned and gave Rosa a smile, praying to every God that she hadn't heard.

After a moment of whining and rolling his eyes, Lance finally turned to his mom. "Alright. Fine, I'll go on a group date. But on a few conditions."

Rosa folded her arms over her chest. "And they are?"

Lance gave his crooked smile. "One, I definitely want Danny and Rachel to go, because then it won't feel like I'm being babysat. And two, I get to pick the date activity."

Tapping a finger to her lip, Rosa appeared to be contemplating the proposal. Then she nodded her head and smiled brightly. "Great, I'm excited! And your father will be so mad." She giggled at that, as if making her husband mad was a hilarious triumph.

After ushering the boys to finish the laundry, Rosa happily left the room, her round cheeks pink with excitement. As soon as she was out of sight, Lance swung around and gave Keith an impish gaze.

"I know *exactly* what we're doing on the date."

Keith moved back to folding clothes, moving the items into the basket to be put away. "And what have you decided?" Keith asked, more interested in the clothes than Lance's wild ideas.

Lance giggled. "It's a *surprise* ."

Keith sighed, poisoned with the feeling that whatever wild thing Lance chose wouldn't end well. When Lance was given the opportunity to be in charge, it often went astray. Flashbacks to freshman year plagued Keith's memories, remembering how Lance had dragged them all the way to Mt. Hood in Oregon to go skiing. It had been fun in theory, except for the fact that Lance had been raised in a desert and hadn't seen snow in his fucking life. The trip had resulted in three broken bones amongst Lance and Pidge alike.

So yeah, with Lance planning? Keith was worried.

Day 6

Wednesday, December 21st

5:01 P.M .

Keith couldn't believe he'd agreed to this.

There he was, standing in the middle of an arcade, one that had required an hour and a half drive all the way to Scottsdale, Arizona. And why had they driven so far? Why was Keith in an arcade?

He was about to play lazertag.

Lance had been adamant about his date choice, and despite everyone's pleas, it was decided that the group date would ensue at the Wunderworld Arcade. The night would be filled with video games, over priced popcorn, and an all out battle of laser tag.

Normally Keith would be thrilled to pummel Lance in a competitive game of blasters and lasers. Not this time. Their date night game would be way different in comparison to the laser tag games Keith and his friends had played at university. This time Keith and Lance would be team mates - which was fine too, Keith wasn't complaining on that part. He was more than ready to battle fake aliens with Lance at his side. Except, they weren't battling aliens. They were battling the other date members, couple to couple, and Keith was beyond worried.

It was three teams. Rosa and Jaime (the purple team), Daniel and Rachel (the green team), and Keith and Lance (the red team- much against Lance's wishes). Lance, Rachel, and Rosa were ecstatic, the three of them as enthusiastic as children. They'd raced to the laser tag room, deciding on their vest colors almost immediately. On the other hand, Jaime and Daniel were just proud they'd even survived

the drive up.

And Keith? Hell, Keith was just worried Rosa would bust a hip.

Their laser tag instructor was a teenage girl named Lucy, a short girl that popped her gum too much and spoke as if bored. She lead them through the rules of the game after each group decided their team colors. (A long ordeal that consisted of way too much bickering.)

"Alright," Lucy began, popping her gum for the hundredth time. "The rules are as follows: no running, no screaming, no jumping over the obstacles, and keep two hands on the blaster at all times. Oh, and no physical contact."

"Damn," Rachel commented. "What a bummer."

Lance snorted. "What? Were you and Danny planning to make out in the arena or something?"

"More like kick your sorry ass," Rachel spat with a snicker.

Their instructor, Lucy, simply popped her gum. "Do whatever you want in the arena, I don't care. Just don't break anything."

Lucy continued on with the rest of the instructions, nodding off the rules and points of gameplay so blandly that Keith feared Jaime would fall asleep. Once she was finished, the group followed her single file through a black door.

The arena was amazing; Neon colors filled the dark room, covering large black obstacles in the form of spray paint and outlining detailed images of space scenes with galactic planets.

"Alright," Lucy mumbled, punching a code into a keypad by the wall. "You've got fifteen minutes. Have fun, or whatever."

"Good luck," Rosa proclaimed happily, hugging her blaster close to her chest. "Play fair!"

Lance just smirked, following the others into the arena single file. A deep, robotic voice boomed over the intercom.

"Warriors! Geeeett Ready!"

The three groups raced into the arena, each separating into their

respective bases, Overly loud dubstep music echoed off each game obstacle, making it both hard to hear and hard to speak.

"Are you ready to get fucking creamed?!" Rachel yelled over the music, gripping her blaster and getting ready to run. She was ecstatic, her toothy grin spread across cheeks already red from the room's heat. She was like a teenager, no one could've known she had two kids at home.

"Hey!" Rosa called from her base on the other side of the room. "No cursing!"

The voice above them began to boom numbers counting down from ten, and Keith moved his blaster into position.

"Mamá , we can curse if we want," Lance called out in a whine.
"This is an adult date! No kids!"

Keith couldn't see Rosa, but he could just imagine her face; nose pointed up, eyelashes batting, all in a playful display of snootiness.
"I refuse to say 'fuck' in the presence of children like yourselves."

Lance gasped, faking disgust and pain. "Ma! How dare you? I'm twenty years old!"

"Just let your mother have her fun," Jaime called from his base.
"Now everyone! Play safe, yeah?"

"Shhh!" Rosa cried out. "The countdown! We're almost ready!"

She was right; the loud, robot voice declared the number five. Then four, then three, slowly two, and then...

One.

The first to move was Rachel, a battle cry escaping the young woman rather dramatically. Through the cracks of a few neon boxes Keith could see Rachel leap over several fake boulders, her hair whipping her cheeks violently.

"Alright," Lance began, tugging Keith back by the vest to stop him from racing into battle. "We need a battle strategy."

Keith gaped. "Seriously? This is *laser tag* , it's not like we're fighting for our lives."

"Are you for real? Las tag is *always* strategy worthy. I have to win; there's no way I'm losing to a bunch of senior citizens."

"Fine," Keith huffed, turning around fully so that the two of them could hide behind a tall pillar. "What do you have in mind?"

Day 6

Apparently, Lance had *a lot* in mind. He'd assembled two different battle strategies prior to the drive into Scottsdale, one of which had included mirrors and black painters tape. Keith had ruled that one out immediately, instead going with plan two: separating for an attack on the two teams.

"You take the field and fight my brother and Rachel; what they lack in aim they make up for in speed. You're fast and can catch up to their combined force. You don't have to worry about my parents-they're old."

Keith grumbled. "What about you?"

"I've played this game enough to know that *someone* needs to defend the base. That'll be me. I can also earn points by shooting the other bases from afar."

Keith snorted but nodded his head. "Whatever, let's just do it." They shared one firm look before splitting in separate directions.

Keith moved swiftly, maneuvering around large pillars, boxes, and other jungle gym pieces used for gameplay. He moved towards Rachel and Danny's base; it was a good place to start. Maybe he could earn them some points by attacking *their* base.

Sure enough, Keith ran into Rachel on his way there. The moment they made eye contact she aimed and shot, just barely missing Keith's shoulder sensor. He'd twisted his body at just the right time, allowing him enough leverage to swing around and blast her in the chest.

Alright, so maybe Lance was right. Keith was fast.

The battle continued on after that, Rachel throwing out teasing marks as she raced after Keith across the arena. Keith was determined, yet it was strange channeling his competitive nature towards someone *other* than Lance. Rachel, Keith discovered, was just as competitive as Lance.

Keith didn't know very much about the girl, or at least he knew the basics. She was Danny's best friend and wife, as well as a fellow lawyer. Keith could only imagine the amount of terror she held in a courtroom. He also knew she had one heck of a personality, vivacious as well as terrifying.

The two chased each other around the arena's barriers, both moving and aiming to win. Their battle was energetic, both players fast, swift and equally intact.

However, it didn't come to a standstill until Keith tripped, his body flailing into a corner.

He made a small cry as his body rammed against the neon wall, the impact strong yet hardly painful. It was more of a shock than anything else, though pain still erupted across the side of his left body.

Rachel raced to his side, her gun dropped to hang from the vest as she reached to help him up. "Are you okay?" Her voice had switched to concern in a matter of moments.

Keith nodded and gladly took her outstretched hand. "I'm alright."

She smirked. "In that case-" With one quick move she aimed and shot, blasting his chest sensor.

"Hey!" He cried, reaching for his blaster.

Except, to Keith's dismay, the blaster wasn't at his side.

Normally the blasters hung at the side of the vest by connecting with a wire and a hook. Keith's impact with the wall had sent his gun flying, breaking the hook *and* detaching the wire. It then lay only a few feet away, the plastic dirty and scratched from the impact.

Keith's eyes widened. "Rachel do not-"

He was too late, as the woman scrambled to grab the laser gun. She snickered, holding the plastic toy in her hands. "Nope. Can't have it."

Keith groaned, audibly annoyed. "Come one, that's not playing fair."

A snort. "Who said Laser tag had to be fair?"

Keith cursed, silently wishing he'd agreed to taking the black tape Lance had offered. He could've cheated.

"Come on," Keith begged, reaching for the blaster. She pulled it back playfully. "Just give me my laser gun."

"Nope. This is my leverage. I'm gonna win this game whether you like it or not."

Damn, Keith thought, still reaching for the gun. It didn't help that they were around the same height, or the fact that Rachel had experience evading from grabby hands. She was Mateo's mother after all.

She would totally be scary in the courtroom.

After his third attempt at taking the blaster, Keith finally gave up. "Fine," He grumbled, folding his hands over his chest. "What do you want from me?"

The smile on her cheeks was diabolical, a crooked display that only furthered Keith's worries. "I want to take your base, but to do that I need Lance out of the picture. He's guarding it- I know he is."

"So," Keith began, running through her words for an explanation. "You want me to, I don't know, distract him?"

"Yup." She popped the one syllable word and tossed Keith's gun to her other hand.

"That's ridiculous. No way I'll help you."

"No distraction, no gun. No gun? No winning points. You'll lose either way- you might as well *try* ."

Keith scowled, deciding then and there that Rachel was a *menace*. She knew the tricks and she knew the trade; Lance and Keith had seriously underestimated Rachel's abilities. Not only was she a skilled player, but she was manipulative. And? She was totally right.

"This is blackmail, and you know it."

She smiled. "I work with criminals, kiddo. I know what I'm doing here."

After eyeing the girl down for a few more moments, running the situation through his head, he finally agreed.

"Fine," He sputtered, moving in a rush to find Lance. "But you better keep your end of the bargain!"

Day 6

How was he supposed to do this? Keith could barely get the guy to do homework at uni, let alone distract him from the *best game of his life*. Keith knew there was only one option, only one way. Did Keith particularly *like this one way*? No, it was ludicrous, and yet Keith was *still* following through with it.

The journey back across the arena was dangerous, especially without a weapon to defend himself. Keith moved in stealth, hiding behind neon barricades so he wouldn't be seen. It involved a lot of crawling, the linoleum floor digging into his kneecaps.

Groaning, hating himself, hating laser tag, and hating Rachel, Keith ran off to find Lance.

After racing around a few pillars and hiding from the enemy several times, Keith found Lance reloading ammo under their base. The neon red light shined down on his skin, and for a moment Keith felt himself go numb.

"L-Lance!" He cried awkwardly. The boy turned his gaze on Keith and smiled.

"You defeat the other bases yet?"

Keith swallowed and shook his head.

"Then get back out there and - wait. Where'd your blaster go?"

Keith bit his lip.

Everything about the situation felt wrong to Keith. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen. Not that it mattered, not that doing this with Lance affected Keith emotionally in the slightest. It was part of the job description, it was part of the fake boyfriend package deal. It was supposed to be platonic. It was supposed to be simple.

No matter how many times Keith had denied the thought, each time the answer came back a little bit stronger. It wasn't simple. It was

more than just simple, it was painful and tender and completely backfiring.

Do it, Keith's mind urged him. Do it, get it over with, finish the deal.

Hands shaking violently, Keith outstretched his fingers to hold Lance's jaw. Then he spoke, voice at a whisper near the edge of Lance's jaw.

"I'm going to kiss you. Tell me right now if I can't."

Keith could feel Lance gasp, the gulp of air catching in his throat. He didn't move - barely even breathing - all as Keith gripped Lance's sharp jaw with the pad of his thumb.

"W-Why?"

Standing this close allowed Keith access to the ring of blue around Lance's irises. The fluorescent red lighting of the arena overshadowed his eyes from far away, but here? Here he could see just the rim, a light border that hinted at the real color beneath.

"People are watching," Keith explained softly. His face never moved away; if anything they moved closer of both their wills.

Lance blinked.

"Tell me no, and I'll stop."

Keith closed his eyes, just waiting, *waiting* for Lance to say no. He *needed* him to say no, he ached for it, he yearned for the confirmation that this didn't have to go on.

It wasn't that Keith was afraid the kissing. If anything it was the opposite- he wanted it. No, he burned for it, the mere possibility of a kiss smoldering Keith from the inside out. However, what he was afraid of was the consequences; the feelings that Keith knew for a fact were just beginning to bloom.

"Tell me no," Keith repeated, his breath tickling the edge of Lance's lips.

Then, as if fearful, as if hesitant, Lance snaked his arms around Keith's hips.

And then he kissed him.

Day 6

Skin.

Keith loved Lance's skin.

It was sticky with sweat, yet smooth to the touch. Keith wanted to feel all of it, every last hair, every last scar, every last blemish. He let his fingernails trail at the base of Lance's neck, tugging softly at the hairs that grew there.

Lips.

Keith loved Lance's lips.

They were soft and wet, forcing pressure and lust (lust?) against Keith's open mouth. Lance let his tongue tickle the inside of Keith's teeth, earning small moans. Each sound and earnest whine resulted in impatient tugs of his shirt and hair.

Heat.

Keith loved the heat.

The kiss was intense, moving at a fast pace that left the two boys breathless. They'd already been so hot, from all the running and chasing under neon lights. It was like living off adrenaline and adrenaline only, the chemicals pushing them to get closer, kiss harder, breathe faster, feel deeper.

Lance.

Keith loved Lance.

Keith wasn't sure how'd he'd gotten here. It was hard to process information when your hand was up another boy's shirt, and even harder when said boy had his tongue in your mouth.

Keith was backed up against a solid surface, his black shirt meshing with the neon graffiti that decorated the wall. The laser tag vests had been a nuisance, making a large gap between the two of them. They'd tugged them off ages ago, all so their bodies could become closer.

Lance hooked his index fingers around two of Keith's belt loops, only to tug his pelvis closer. He let his thumb rub at the skin above

Keith's pants, all it did was make Keith shiver. Everything was causing Keith's mental state to go haywire, to sit in a state of shock, no longer able to do anything. Chemicals and emotions bounced off the walls of his skull, and the endorphins only made Keith grab a fistful of Lance's shirt.

Keith kissed Lance the way he'd always wanted to, letting himself move at a pace he'd only dreamed of. He could keep going, because it was a fake, a ruse, a tactic, a coverup. It wasn't real for Lance, (or so Keith thought) but definitely the strongest reality for Keith.

Kissing Lance was like a whole new angle of seeing him. Keith had seen the true Lance Sanchez at his most vulnerable state, emotionally compromised, mentally struggling. He'd been intimate with Lance in those ways, but physically? Keith and Lance had only ever been physically intimate the night under the glow stars, when Keith touched Lance's scar.

And he was touching it again, but this time with a different intent in mind. He pressed the pads of his palm up against the scar, gripping Lance's skin tightly. It made Lance gasp into Keith's mouth and writhe under the sensation.

God. Lance was going to be the end of him.

Keith wasn't sure how he could stop this. Christmas break would end and this would be over. It would never be a possibility again, it would never occur, the opportunities would be gone. Keith needed to cherish the moments he had before they flew away forever.

So he kissed harder, letting a hum radiate at his throat. He let his hands slip from their place underneath Lance's shirt to move more into his hair, tugging at the short, brunet strands. He ran his hand through it and pulled, only making Lance gasp.

When Lance whined his name, breath almost gone and chest heaving, Keith wasn't sure if he'd even heard right. Just the thought of Lance muttering his name in a situation like this made his heart burst.

"Keith," Lance mumbled out again, gripping tightly to Keith's hips and holding him there.

Lance said his name. Lance had said his *fucking name*.

Keith could've screamed, or jumped off a building, or ran a

marathon, or *something*. But he couldn't, and he was there, and if he could only do one thing it would be to envelop Lance in more kisses. He wanted to kiss his eyelids, his nose, his stupidly large ears, his shoulders blades, his belly button, his knuckles, the soft fat at his hips-

But he couldn't do that. That was something only true lovers did.

To the outside eye, the two boys looked completely engulfed in each other (which was entirely correct). The outsider would see lust, and desire, and buckets of sexual urge. But did the two boys recognise that in each other? No, not at all. Both fully believed the kiss's emotions stood one sided. Both wanted this, both wanted to go faster, kiss harder. And yet, both were ridiculously, tragically, devastatingly oblivious.

And if the outsiders knew the truth? They'd be banging their skull into a pole, all because there had never been two people more stupidly inattentive to subtext.

Thankfully for the two boys, their other group date members did not know the truth, not in the slightest. To them the boys were completely devoted to each other, fervent and passionate and all around in love. (That was also true. Two truths, a couple overlapping lies, a whole lot of miscommunication. The whole fake relationship situation was obviously chaos.)

Then, like a knife had sliced them in half, the two boys split apart.

To both boy's surprise, Danny had taken their distraction as an advantage. He stood with both hands on his blaster, shooting repeatedly at the laser tag vests that lay abandoned on the metal floor. And next to him? Next to him was his despicable wife, Keith's blaster swinging from a finger.

For a moment the boys stood and just watched, shocked and flabbergasted. So many things had gone wrong: They had, first of all, lost the game. Second of all, they had lost *terrifyingly* so. And third?

It was all Rachel's fault.

Day 6

Wednesday, December 21st

5:21 P.M .

Lance was not pleased.

And Keith? Keith was embarrassed.

First of all, kissing Lance had been bittersweet. It was, in all honesty, everything he'd imagined it would be. He only wished it could've happened somewhere better, somewhere romantic, somewhere that wasn't a fucking lazer tag area. And it didn't help that now Rosa saw them as two horny college kids (which they most definitely were) and that her suspicions of them being sex-crazed were true. Which truly helped their poorly crafted boyfriend lie, but sure didn't help Keith win her approval in anyway.

The red team (aka Lance and Keith) came in last place and lost by over eighty thousand points. Rachel and Danny were the official victors, winning only because of that ridiculous stunt they'd pulled at the very end. Taking over a base, repeatedly shooting a vest, and not being attacked in the process tended to have its benefits.

"It was like stealing from a bank without any cops to stop you!" Rachel cried while describing Danny and her victory. The group had finished their game earlier, and were politely told to never come back to the lazer tag arena (they'd broken too many rules.) They'd made their way over to the restaurant part of the arcade instead, now piled into a round booth.

Lance banged his head down against the restaurant table, groaning loudly. "I can't believe I lost," He grumbled into the linoleum surface for the seventh time that evening. "Please. Please let me have another round."

Rachel laughed and took a slurp of the mint oreo shake she shared with Danny. "Nope, we can't. Your boyfriend over there broke his blaster."

"Because *you* ran him against a wall," Lance stated matter-of-factly, having moved his head up from the table. "and you blackmailed him into kissing me for a diversion. That's illegal."

"Illegal? Hardly. I know illegal."

Jaime looked beyond uncomfortable, and had stayed that way since they'd been kicked from the arena. Keith knew he was trying hard, and often he would push himself to smile or laugh along with the

group's jokes. Jaime wanted more than anything to be supportive, which is why he'd agreed to the damn group date in the first place.

Keith was silent while he watched the family exchange, taking his own sip of the strawberry milkshake Lance and him shared. Lance had picked out the flavor (something about strawberries being the alpha fruit), and Keith agreed solely because he wanted to share. Sharing milkshakes was romantic, and cute, and equally gay. Keith considered himself to be all of those things.

"Anyway," Rachel began, dipping a fry into her shake. "Lance and Keith are nasty. Definitely just confirmed by me."

"Um, no," Lance began, pointing his finger at Rachel and Daniel accusingly. "Do you two remember a few years ago when it was Danny bringing home Rachel for Christmas? You were ten times worse. I almost *died* from PDA overload."

"And who was it that just made out in a laser tag arena? Not me." Danny said this pointedly, leaning over Rachel's food to stare Lance down.

Lance opened his mouth to defend himself, but Rosa interrupted him. "Oh, shush! I want to talk about the old days." Rosa began to chuckle, thinking back causing her sentimental heart swell. "Back when Rachel and Danny were in college! It was so long ago! You two were so cute, and Danny was constantly a blushing mess."

"I know someone else who's a blushing mess," Rachel muttered under her breath, only to earn an elbow jab from Lance. He was in fact blushing, and a maddening color of red too.

Rosa turned to Keith and began to talk excitedly, her hands animated. "Rachel and Lance *hated* each other from the very beginning. It was so bad, Lance put Rachel's underwear in the freezer then blamed it on Cleo."

Rachel waved her hands at Keith, accidentally flinging ketchup from a french fry onto the the table. "I was pissed! He was such a little fucker, but then I got him back by doing that weird prank thing with the bucket and the door and the water-" She paused, turning to her husband. "What's it called again?"

Daniel gave a deadpan stare, amazed that his wife seriously didn't know such an easy name. "It's the bucket prank, hun."

Rachel waved her hands around again, eyes wide. "Yes! Yes, that one. After that it was an all out prank war, and we became best friends. Right, Lance?" She turned to the boy next to her and wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

Lance scowled. "You are a traitor to this friendship, Rachel Elisa Sanchez."

Keith found that throughout the whole conversation he couldn't stop smiling. It amazed him how Rachel, a woman who wasn't even related by blood, could fit so well within their family. And strangely enough? He envied that in her. A part of Keith yearned to be connected to the Sanchez family in some way, connected more than just the simple 'boyfriend' he was.

It was moments like this that haunted Keith during his time in Arizona. These moments would appear unexpectedly, piercing Keith's emotions like a needle in a water balloon. It was in these small patches of time that Keith would *remember*.

One more week and he'd never see the Sanchez family again. No little Mateo to play cars with, no Mateo to be his partner in crime. There would be no Josie, the girl he'd give warm smiles to from across the dinner table. She'd always blush and smile back. There'd be no Cleo, the girl who told him interesting facts and talked about random subjects, no Cleo to converse with when his arms were elbow deep in dish soap water. Benji would be gone from his life, no longer there to tease him, to tell him Lance childhood stories, to teach him spanish swears. Daniel and Rachel would be gone too, and little Isabella, who blew bubbles in his direction and tugged at his hair when he was forced to hold her.

And Rosa? He'd miss Rosa, possibly more than anyone else. He'd miss her laughter and her dorky jokes. The sexual innuendos and the talks of safety she gave far too freely. He'd miss the way she'd dance to pop music when she made dinner, or how she had the habit of scolding her children when they did something bad. He'd miss how beautiful she was. The wrinkles in her face, the chubbiness of her belly and arms, her round cheeks, the twinkling crease of her eyelids, the marks of old age that dotted her skin and hands like stars.

But of all the things he'd miss when he left Rosa, the one thing he'd remember, the thing he'd never get to see again? Her smile. Because it was always there, whether it was sad, or happy, or a mixture of both. She wore it when she cooked, she wore it when she sang, she

wore it when she stood in her bathrobe yelling at Benji to feed the dog, she wore it when Keith was caught staring at her. And no matter what variation she decided to wear that day, it was always a good one.

If I could have any mother in the world, who would I choose?

Keith pondered that.

Rosa. I would choose Rosa.

Keith thought this absentmindedly, eyes staring at nothing while the others chuckled at their familiar conversation. He felt himself space out, barely paying attention to the world around him.

And then he was woken up, simply by the touch of Lance's finger at his arm.

"Keith?" He questioned quietly, looking a tad worried. "Are you okay?"

Keith blinked a few times before nodding. "Yeah," He mumbled, moving his head up and down. "I'm okay."

The group finished their dinner ten minutes later, and Jaime insisted on paying the check. They traveled back towards the arcade area, and just as Rosa and Jaime turned to head out the front door, Lance yelped in protest.

"We can't leave yet! There's an arcade!"

"I am most *definitely* not going home yet," Rachel agreed, suddenly tugging at her husband's hand towards the arcade floor. "I have children there!"

Lance raised an eyebrow. "Don't you love your children?"

Rachel groaned and continued to annoy her husband with the tugging. "Yes! But they can let me have my good adult fun for one more damn hour."

"Adult fun?" Danny questioned, letting his small wife pull him forward. She wasn't making much process, especially when she was so small in comparison to his height of 6'1. "You mean playing arcade games?"

Rachel let out a huff. "Yes, Daniel. Adult fun." She gave one final tug before finally letting go. "I want to play that one game with the dancing and the bright neon colors and the shapes—"

"Dance Dance Revolution, hun. It's Dance Dance Revolution."

Rachel's eyes beamed. "Yes! Yes, that one."

Once Rachel and Danny disappeared into the sea of arcade screens, noises and laughter echoing across the floor, the others decided they had no choice but to stay. Keith bought a large bag of tokens and set off to play, leaving Rosa and Jaime to sit a table and rest to their hearts content.

"Alright," Keith began, holding the heavy bag of game tokens in his hand. "Where to first?"

His question hadn't been heard in the slightest, Lance already escaping into the game whirlwind. Keith was forced to search for the enthusiastic child, and finally found him gaping in front of a Star Wars racer game, his eyes round and mouth open wide.

"I must play this," Lance whispered, in awe of the game and somehow in love. "It's my calling."

Keith chuckled and handed Lance two tokens. "You'll be needing these to play, smartass."

The two boys hopped into the game console seats and input their coins. As the game roared to life, Darth Vader's theme rumbled and made Lance bounce in his seat.

"Are you ready to get fucking *destroyed*, Gyeong?" Lance asked while gripping tightly to the game simulator's steering wheel, hopping up and down like a kid on Christmas.

Keith rolled his eyes, showing he didn't care. "Have fun with that, Sanchez." Keith lightly chuckled, because even if he didn't want to admit it outloud, he *totally* cared. He was about to pummel Lance into the motherfucking ground, and it was gonna be *sweet*.

The game sparked into life, and the race began. Keith felt calm and contained as he spun the wheel, only violent determination splayed on his face. Lance, on the other hand, looked ready to burst. He was definitely not as good at Keith when it came to racing games, and his vivid, angry response to losing only fueled Keith's drive to win.

Keith obviously won the racing game, coming in at first place and Lance in third (He was even more furious for not only coming in behind Keith, but an NPC as well.)

"You cheated," Lance declared, sliding up from his seat. "You totally cheated."

Keith gave Lance a deadpan gaze, speaking sarcastically up at the taller boy. "Yes, Lance. Because I totally cheated, At a game that you literally cannot cheat on."

Lance scowled, though it was more childish and pouty than actual anger. "Fine, but we need to play more games and have a tournament. It's my new goal to officially beat you at *something* ."

Keith silently agreed with a nod. There Lance was, being his competitive self again. It seemed Lance had forgotten how he was already better than Keith at several things, like cooking, dancing, interacting with children, understand love. Still, Keith decided to indulge in Lance's fantasies and he agreed at the tournament of arcade games.

"And no cheating!" Lance added with a pointed finger.

Keith raised his hands in defense. "No cheating; I promise. I'm too good a man to be a cheater."

The games began, and in the beginning Keith was set on letting Lance win a few games to settle his competitive nature. Keith couldn't help it though, he was just more coordinated than Lance, and it was beginning to make the competitive boy's hair stand on end. Keith had already won at several games, including shooting games, driving games, games of chance, skeeball, and an extreme game of air hockey that had sent the puck flying twice.

An hour had passed, and within that time Keith had beat Lance at every single game. Lance had come close several times, and his losing definitely didn't mean he was a bad player. Quite the contrary, it was obvious he knew a lot about what he was doing and how to go about it.

However, things changed when they found themselves in front of Dance Dance Revolution.

Keith gulped, staring at the neon colored foot pads and their fast switches. A virtual anime girl twirled on the bright screen, and

Keith inwardly cringed.

"I can't believe you're making me do this," Keith whispered, feeling his arms being pulled towards the large game.

Lance continued to tug at Keith in protest, the toothy grin spread wide on his cheeks. "It'll be *so* fun. Plus, I have a feeling this is something I can officially beat you at! I mean, it's -" He chuckled. "- it's dancing. And you're the worst dancer in the entire world."

Keith gasped, playfully hurt, even if he was still following Lance up onto the game's dance pad. "I am not! I'm a fine dancer."

"Well," Lance began, determination worn proudly on his face. He was cocky, confident that he would win. "We'll see about that. Ready to get creamed?"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Let me lose already so I can beat you at air hockey again."

After Lance slipped the coins into the slot, the game sparked to life. Bright colors and vibrant lights flashed in Keith's eyes while he watched Lance pick through the songs. Cringey techno music from 2004 blared through the selection screen.

"God, just choose already so we can ditch this awful noise," Keith whined, watching several songs pass that would've been completely fine to dance to.

"Shhh-" Lance waved his hand in Keith's direction to shut him up. "I'm trying to find the perfect song. This is momentous, I need something as my victory score."

Keith rolled his eyes and waited another five seconds until Lance finally chose a song.

"Your music taste is impeccable," Keith declared with sarcasm oozing from his lips. "I'm just *so excited* to be dancing to Lady Gaga in public."

"Shut up, your music taste is Depeche Mode and My Chemical Romance, you're not much better." Despite their bickering, there were smiles on both their faces and the jabs were thrown loosely.

The two boys turned their gaze back to the dance screen and the song began. Brightly colored shapes appeared, coded to different

dance moves. The two boys started out their dancing at the same pace, moving limbs in time. However, after a few beats the two boys slowly lost their parallel.

Lance was better, definitely better, and it was making Keith red in the face from all of Lance's *insults*. And it wasn't that the insults weren't bad or anything, quite the opposite. They were good, in a weird, Lance sort of way, and it was making him blush beyond control.

"Come on pretty boy! You can move faster than that!"

Oh God. Pretty boy? Really? He had the nerve to call him that even after their kissing incident?

Keith spoke through gritted teeth, trying his hardest to move faster. "I am, Lance." His calves were beginning to burn from the intense exercise, and the excess of movement and coordination was getting to him. "Now just play the fucking game."

Lance looked like he wasn't even having an issue, raising an eyebrow innocently. "What? Is pretty boy scared he won't win?"

Keith gave him a deathly glare. "I will push you off this fucking dance floor. You know I will, Sanchez."

With his innocent smile turning devilish, Lance countered quickly. "But you wouldn't. Because that's cheating, and you said you were, and I quote, 'Too good a man to be a cheater'. Come on, handsome, defeat me and we'll see how this goes."

Rolling his bottom lip between his teeth ferociously, Keith finally decided he needed to shut Lance out. *Just ignore him*, his mind screamed, persuading himself to just pretend Lance wasn't even there. *Ignore him and his cute nicknames and his stupid face and his large ears and his crooked smile and his fucking ridiculous laugh-*

Oh god.

"Kill me," Keith whispered out loud, just quiet enough that no one would hear.

Lance was dancing, just as he had before. Now that may not sound like much of an issue, but it most definitely was. And why?

Now he was using his hips. Using them to truly move, not just using

his feet. He used his head, his arms, practically his entire body, all to make such a simple dancing game look *genuinely good*. His eyes were closed as if in a gleeful, tranquil state of being, just moving his hips to the beat. It was hot, and Keith didn't even understand how hips could move in such a way. What was it, how was it possible? Did he have an extra alien bone in his hip that allowed him more movement? Did he just have more muscle in his pelvis for convenient control? Was this even *fucking natural*?

It was beginning to make a fire burn beneath Keith's ribs, turning him angry. Should he fight Lance to the death? Or was this feeling more of a 'fight him to the bed' sort of scenario? Keith wasn't sure, but both options sounded pretty legit.

Lance won by a landslide, mostly due to Keith's flustered state. It caused a large decrease in points, and he even missed the ending dance move by a full two seconds.

Lance threw his hands in the air, his overjoyed face too happy to not be cute. He began to squeal and squirm in place, eyes squeezed shut as he wheezed, "I won! I won! I won, I can't believe I beat Keith at something! I motherfucking beat-"

Keith was completely out of breath, leaning over and holding onto his knees for support. "I thought-" He wheezed in between breathes. "I thought we said no cheating?"

"I didn't cheat," Lance defended, sticking his tongue out in Keith's direction. "I'm just Shakira, and my hips never lie." Lance began to do his victory dance, spinning in circles and shaking his fists.

Keith groaned and leaned back against an empty game for support. "You did that weird hip thing at the end on purpose."

Lance halted his dancing. "I did not. You just love my hips."

The two of them made sudden, sharp eye contact, and for a moment Keith wasn't sure how to respond. Yes, Lance knew he appreciated them, he'd told him in the Corolla a few days earlier. But the way Lance had said it, the tone in his voice, it made Keith wonder if Lance *knew*.

Did Lance know about Keith's crush?

Honestly, Keith wasn't even sure if he wanted to call it a crush. In his opinion it was unrequited love, something he knew would never

be returned. His plan was that Lance would never know, never would he tell him. Because if he did? Lance would never want to see him again, knowing the two of them had kissed and slept in the same bed. It would leave Keith heartbroken.

He'd rather have Lance in his life, oblivious to his feelings, than not have Lance at all.

The two of them left the dance game and moved more into the center of the arcade floor. Lance moved his eyes as if searching for something specific, and Keith raised an eyebrow. "Looking for another game you can beat me on?"

Lance shook his head, still looking. "Nah." And then his eyes lit up when he found it, and he was suddenly gripping Keith's hand and tugging him in the direction of his discovery.

It was a photobooth, the cheesy types that were at amusement parks or fairs.

Lance was ecstatic, wrenching the black curtain open to reveal it was empty. He was giddy, sliding inside and pulling Keith in with him.

"God," Keith began, already blushing and feeling uncomfortable. "These are those things that people have sex in."

Lance rolled his eyes and input a few dollars. "Shut up, we aren't going to have sex, stupid. We're going to take actual pictures together, like a real couple."

"Lame, but whatever."

Keith wasn't about to admit it, but he was excited to take cute, romantic photos in a photobooth. Still, did he want Lance to know that? No. Lance needed to assume Keith was against such a thing. It was something straight from a chick flick (Just like the ones that Lance lived for. Keith secretly enjoyed watching them, but only if Lance was with him.)

Keith sat completely still, watching the screen flash them a few instructions. It was then that Keith realized how close they were, their shoulders squashed against each other, their heads centimeters apart. Keith could hear Lance's breathing; it was evenly paced in comparison to Keith's.

Keith wasn't sure if he could survive taking four pictures. It was just four of them, they only lasted a few seconds, and they weren't going to kill him. Except he was blushing, his face inflamed in red, and Lance was just *so close*. He could feel his breath on his skin, Keith just close enough to see the soft freckles that lined his nose, or the length of his brown eyelashes.

The first photo went painlessly, and Keith decided he needed to just push through. So he smiled, he made funny faces, he flipped off the camera, he let Lance have his fun in the photo booth. Then, as the last photo's timer began to count down, Lance turned to him.

"I'm going to kiss you."

Keith panicked. No, no more kissing. He couldn't handle any more kissing today, he'd had far too much and any more would make him lose his goddamn mind for this idiot in front of him.

So of course, like the ridiculous man he was, Keith said yes.

Lance took no time waiting. The moment the simple word left Keith's lips, Lance was kissing them, cupping his jaw with both hands and pressing both boys fiercely together.

It was hard and soft at the safe time, like Lance wanted more than anything to go farther, but was holding himself back. Keith let his eyes flutter closed, and he melted for just a moment, wrapping his arms around Lance's neck.

When the camera snapped the photo, the two kissed for only a second longer. Keith was grateful for that extra second. He was going to cherish it, because one second of kissing was worth a thousand years of no kissing, and he would savor that on his tongue forever.

They broke apart and Lance shrugged casually. "My mom will want to see the photo. She'll say we're cute, so I figured it was worth it."

Then he was gone from the photo booth, sending the black curtain flapping behind him. Keith sat alone inside the photobooth, shocked, eyes wide, hand lingering at his own lips. Keith swallowed down air and ran a shaking hand through his longer hair, wishing that Lance would stop doing this to him.

He left the photobooth after a few moments, finally deeming himself composed enough to function. Lance held out one of three

photo strips to Keith, a light tint of red on his nose.

"These photos are cute," Lance mumbled.

Keith took one look at them and died, he literally wanted to crawl back into the photobooth and never come out.

Lance was right, the photos were beyond cute. Like, adorable status, like a newborn baby laying in a field of flowers level of adorable.

"These are..." Keith trailed off as he struggled to think of the right word. He couldn't say cute, that would be weird. Were they cool? No, they were kissing in the last image. Were they hot? No, the funny faces were too ridiculous to make them look attractive.
"They're, um, these are pretty gay."

"Well. It's okay to be gay." Then he gave his crooked smile, and Keith almost melted into a puddle of water. "And you know what? I like 'em."

Day 6

8:52 P.M .

The date had been a success. Lance declared this several times on the car ride back. Even though the others attempted to mention his major game loss, in the end they all agreed with him. However, the moment they entered through the Sanchez family front door, chaos ensued.

Benji came racing towards them, clothes matted, pillow marks on his cheek, and entirely out of breath (which worried Rosa immensely, but he whacked at her hand to show he was fine.) Keith noticed he had wild bed head, and he wondered if the boy had just woken from a nap.

"So, Mamá -" He began, trying to fix his messy hair. "Abuela just woke me up from my nap with a phone call and-"

Both Lance and Rosa screeched simultaneously.

"You were sleeping?" Rosa cried, eyes wide in shock. "While you were *supposed* to be babysitting?!"

Benji spoke casually, rolling his eyes. "Mamá , it ain't a big deal. Cleo is watching them, they're in the back yard."

Rosa gave a soft whack to Benji's arm and firmly placed her hands at her round hips. "Benji! You're getting paid for this job! Not Cleo!"

"Well yeah but-

"I'm paying Cleo instead."

"What?" Benji almost shouted, his jaw dropping. "But Cleo-"

Lance interjected immediately, obviously too impatient. His eyes were wide, and Keith had the feeling that Lance was scared about the same thing he was.

Alright, so yes, Benji sleeping on the job was not a good thing, and yes, he needed to be scolded. However, Keith wanted to get to the part about Abuela, and it was obvious Lance was impatient as well.

"Can we, like, change subject for a moment? Why did Abuela call?"

Benji turned to Lance. "Oh right, that. She called to say her flight comes in from Mexico tomorrow morning. She also said-"

"She's *what*?" Lance shrieked, suddenly tugging at his hair. He was suddenly frantic, eyes wide, mouth agape. Keith didn't blame him for being scared, hell, Keith was too.

And he wasn't terrified of officially meeting the famous 'Abuela'. No, he was worried about how she would *feel* about her grandson having a boyfriend. From what Keith knew, the woman was wild, energetic, enthusiastic, and somewhat batshit crazy. He also knew that she loved her family with all her heart, and would do anything for them. Now, despite these good things, he knew she wouldn't approve of Keith, or his boyfriend position. Which was about to put some tension on Lance, on Keith, and honestly? Tension on the entire family.

"She's arriving tomorrow," Benji affirmed.

"Oh Lord," Rosa began, finally walking into the house and shaking off her shoes. "We need to clean, everything needs to be spotless. She's going to chastise me on my home again. We need to clean!"

"Mamá , " Benji began, watching as the older woman raced about the house to clean the dishes that lay stranded on the counter. "It's nine o'clock at night."

Rosa picked up a towel and shook it at her son angrily. "Clean! Now! Right now!"

Benji groaned loudly and spun on his toes to go put his stuff away, probably his muddy shoes that had been laying on the front porch for half a week. Jaime had escaped to the bedroom (he was good at escaping at intense situations like this), and Daniel and Rachel left to find their children and put them to bed- it was far past their bedtime. (Nine o'clock? Really, Cleo? You're the responsible one.)

"Lance! Go clean your room! Keith and you have been leaving clothes everywhere in there from all your-"

"Mamá !" Lance cried frantically. His blue eyes were wide, and he paced the kitchen with shaking hands. "What am I going to do? Abuela is coming and I have a boy here! She's gonna examine and poke at him! Keith is fragile!"

Rosa turned and looked up at Lance with an angry stare. Despite being several inches shorter than her son, the look she wore was terrifying. "¡Cálmate, Lance!"

Lance spun from his pacing to stare at his mother again. "Calm? Me calm? I can't be calm when my crazy, seventy something year old grandmother comes to meet my boyfriend! She's gonna be so mad, she's gonna do something crazy like last Christmas-"

Keith spoke loudly. "Lance-"

"Oh no, what if she does that ear pulling thing? You know, where she-"

"Lance?"

"Mi Abuela me va a matar, ay no ay no-"

"LANCE!"

"What?"

Lance spun around to look at Keith, who was staring with plain eyes. Keith simply grabbed Lance's hand and tightened his grip around the shaking fingers, bringing them to his lips and placing a soft kiss along the knuckles.

Keith wasn't sure what words would work best to sooth Lance

down. He was panicking, that much was obvious, but it wasn't as bad as the attacks of panic Keith had struggled with before. It was more like fear, wondering what to do next, anxiety growing but still under wraps. Keith swallowed and thought back to the words that would make him calm during his panics. For a moment the two boys just stared at each other, oblivious to Rosa scrubbing frantically at dishes.

"Listen—" Keith began, never dropping Lance's hand. "Your Abuela loves you. And, and you may not be able to control her choices or how she reacts, but you can choose how *you* react."

"I know but what if—"

"Lance, it's late, and if you keep relying on 'what ifs', then you're never going to get anywhere. So for now, lets just go watch a movie. Okay?"

Lance bit his lip, staring at the way Keith rubbed his thumb against Lance's dark palm. "I-I don't know."

Rosa sighed and looked up from the dishes, her soapy hand moved to a hip. "Just go boys."

Keith gave a teeny, comforting smile. "We can watch The Proposal, okay?"

"Okay."

Lance nodded his head and turned to leave the kitchen towards the stairs. As Keith and Lance walked away, both hand in hand, Keith looked over his shoulder at Rosa.

He expected her face to be strained, or at least stressed. And it still was, the sudden arrival of everyone's crazy grandmother already taking its toll. However, she still smiled at Lance, thin lips pulled into an upwards line. Then she whispered two words, only two, and those words made Keith's heart soar. They made him feel like she really, truly liked him, she valued his presence, was thankful that he was there, that she genuinely, truly, sincerely cared.

"Gracias, Keith."

And Keith couldn't help it, he smiled back.

So yeah, Keith wasn't excited for the arrival of Abuela Sanchez. He

wasn't excited in the slightest, he had an idea of what was coming, and he wasn't nearly prepared. But he'd agreed to this trip, and he'd knew what he was getting into from the beginning.

So for now? Lance and him would watch The Proposal, Lance would probably cry, and Keith would pretend to hate it. And then? And then Abuela would arrive, Lance would introduce him, and hopefully Keith wouldn't die in the process.

Day 6

11:32 P.M .

"We need to talk about today."

Keith turned in the bed so that he could look at Lance's eyes, a soft bed sheet draped across the their bodies. The two lay face to face, their noses just centimeters apart, night breath drifting across skin. They'd finished their movie just minutes earlier. Lance had fallen asleep with his cheek against Keith's leg halfway through the film, and at the time Keith had been too nervous to wake the sleeping boy. Now they were finally in bed, teeth brushed, lights off, and dressed down to their sleep clothes (or lack thereof, Lance had a new habit of sleeping shirtless).

"Anything specific you want to talk about?"

Keith cringed at his own sentence. Of course there were things to talk about. He wanted to talk about the soft pads of Lance's fingers and how they'd brushed across his skin, he wanted to talk about his lips and the way they'd placed squarely against his jaw, he wanted to talk about their kiss and he wanted to do it *all over again*.

So yes, there were things to talk about. Islands of words piled up just waiting to be said. Did he want to say them? Yes. But was he about to? Of course not. He wanted to sleep, it was past two in the morning and he had every intention of closing his eyes.

"I just-" Lance paused, looking anywhere but at Keith's dark eyes. "The kissing. It was all because we're fake boyfriends... right?"

Keith shivered under the blankets, even despite the sticky heat and soft line of sweat he sported. The question was strange, unusual enough that it made Keith's breath falter for a moment, and it could mean a number of things. Keith's main fear was that Lance's question indicated toward Keith's crush, that he knew the truth,

that he wanted assurance it was all completely platonic. At the same time Keith wondered if Lance was feeling something, feeling the same, feeling at least *interested* .

Did Lance like Keith?

For a moment Keith seriously considered the possibility. Then his intellect took over, and the rational part of Keith's mind reminded him how preposterous that could be. Keith didn't need false ideas in his head, especially at two a.m.

"Of course," Keith lied. "Part of the job description."

Lance's face was void of emotion, though it was hard to see with only the glow stars for light. He was silent, the only sound was his soft breathing, and Keith assumed he'd fallen asleep. And then Lance spoke, his voice drifting and broken apart, drowsy and obviously on the brink of sleep.

"Okay." He finally whispered, suddenly turning around in the bed with his back to Keith. "Goodnight, Keith."

And then Keith was alone, alone to think about the events of tomorrow, to relive the kisses in his mind, to ponder and consider and contemplate and cry. Alone to count the stars, one by one by one.

4. Chapter 4

Day 7

Thursday, December 22nd

6:30 A.M.

If Keith had learned anything about Lance in the past two years, it was that the Sanchez boy hated cleaning. Actually, no, hate wasn't strong enough a word. Lance *despised* cleaning. The thought of doing so made him whine, cry, and pout like a child. However, it was his strong, fiery, burning detestation of cleaning that made him such an efficient one.

First of all, he'd been raised by Rosa Sanchez. And if anyone knew Rosa Sanchez, it was that her house only ever had two versions: clean as heaven or messy as hell. Therefore, when Rosa finally deemed their messy house fit for a cleaning, she brought out the broom, the mops, the buckets and the dusters. It was always then that the Sanchez children knew it was time to suck up their complaints and get to work. Like the other children, Lance was always obedient and always cleaned when told to do so, as that was something he'd grown up learning. He cleaned *well and efficient*, even if he loathed the idea.

However, just because he obeyed Rosa's cleaning rule didn't mean he'd enjoy the process. He'd continue to bicker and complain, all while scrubbing the floor so ferociously that it shined brighter than a temple. He'd whine while washing at a dirty pot until it was brand new. He knew how to sort laundry efficiently, he knew the tricks to folding a bed sheet, he knew how to remove grape juice stains from clothes, and he knew the perfect way to wash a window. Lance was something of an unintentional home economics professional, even if he abhorred it to the ends of the earth.

Benji wasn't much better, and Josie had the nasty habit of learning from her brothers' examples. While it was true everyone cleaned, it was Josie, Benji and Lance who were yelled at the most during the cleaning hours, usually for making smart comments or complaining under their breath.

Rosa had woken the entire house at 6:30 a.m. that day, marching into each of her children's bedrooms with great intent. She was woman on a mission, and she intended to fulfill said mission if it

was the last thing she ever did.

She'd flung open the door to Lance and Keith's room furiously, letting the hard wood smack against the door stop. She was already showered, dressed, and adorned with a light shade of makeup.

"Wake up!" She bellowed loudly after switching the light on, taking three long strides to the bed covered in blankets, pillows, and two young adult males.

Now, it was moments like this when Keith and Lance were grateful they slept together every night. And it wasn't because they wanted to lay in a bed next to each other (which they most certainly did, but that's not important). It was because when a family member entered the room, like Rosa had just done, said family member would see them cuddling and it would look natural. Because, as most people know, couples cuddle all the time in bed. Especially if one was shirtless.

Lance had the habit of sleeping half naked, which amazed Keith. Why? Keith knew Lance was insecure about the large scar across his abdomen. Lance had told him once that letting people see the scar made him anxious. Even though that made sense, what Keith couldn't comprehend was why he, why Keith, was allowed to see such a thing. He'd already touched the damn thing. He'd let his fingers trace it when they made out in the arcade, he saw it every morning when Lance came back from a shower in a towel, he saw it every night when they went to bed.

Why was Keith so lucky? Why did he have the privilege of being present to one of Lance's strongest insecurities?

Despite his confusion, Keith wasn't really complaining. Sleeping against Lance's bare skin made Keith warmer with the extra body heat, and there were several times in the night when Keith felt his fingers brush against Lance's soft belly, or chest, or even collarbone. Each touch of the skin was electricity, and often Keith slept better in the night because of it.

They'd discovered only two nights earlier that spooning was the best option to preserve space in the bed, as it was a twin and wasn't made to fit two grown men. They'd originally decided Keith would be the little spoon, hence his smaller size. Only one night in and they'd already switched positions within their sleep, Keith backpacking Lance like a child.

"Wake up!" Rosa yelled again, this time her wake up call more like a lion's roar. Lance launched himself upwards in the bed, revealing sleep filled eyes, slobber stains, matted hair, and a shirtless torso.

"What?" He mumbled, struggling to let his eyes adjust to the newfound light. Keith had refused to move, even if he was awake.

Rosa clapped her hands and snapped her fingers repeatedly around Lance's head to wake him up. "Wake up, Lance! ¡Despiértate, despiértate! ¡Es un huevon!"

Lance wiped at his eyes like a toddler, turning his head away from his mother. "¡Bien, bien! ¡Ya voy, Mamá , cálmate, Jesús!"

Keith groaned loudly, letting the tension of sleep escape his body with the noise. He stretched and rolled onto his side, taking the rest of the blankets with him. This only made Lance shriek from lack of warmth and thrash for the blankets.

Rosa huffed, her hands balled into fists at her hips. "Boys! Abuela will be here in three hours, and the house is *not fit for her eyes* . Get up!"

"But-

"Lance Emanuel Sanchez! Your grandmother is arriving and I am about to lose my goddamn mind!"

Lance blinked for a few moments, attempting to process, before flopping back onto his pillow face down. There was faint mumbling from Lance's mouth into the soft fabric, and Rosa looked ready to burst. Literally burst, like explode, like her face was red and similar to an overheated furnace.

"What was that?" She asked in snarky tone, raising her eyebrows as if sensing an attitude. If Keith didn't know any better he'd think she was about to drag her son out of bed physically. (He was ninety nine percent sure that was something she'd do anyway.)

Lance turned his head to the side, though he barely moved more than that. "I said-" He countered in an equally sharp bite. "-That I will come down in a few minutes."

Rosa stared at him a moment longer, as if she needed to affirm that he wasn't throwing spite (which he totally was.) Then, with one final nod, she exited the bedroom. She left the door open on her

way out, which only angered Lance and made him let out another string of curse words into the pillow. Lance had revealed to Keith before that leaving the door open was a special 'mom trick'. It meant that if you wanted to shut the door, you'd have to get up, and if you got up? Well you were already up, so it defeated the purpose of already going back to bed.

Basically, Rosa was a genius.

After a few minutes of laying in bed, contemplating life, and creating lengthy mental lists of the things he most hated (including mornings), Keith finally got up from the bed. Lance took his sweet time following Keith's example, not moving from the bed until Keith had already left to go downstairs.

Once Keith's socked feet hit the wood of the main floor, it was like Rosa's sixth sense had alerted her of another slave for the cleaning. She came storming around the hallway, broom in hand and apron around her waist.

"Keith!" She cried, shoving the broom into his hands. "Sweep?"

Keith blinked, not sure if she was asking him permission or giving him an order. Cautiously he took the broom and began to sweep the hallway of excess dust and dirt. Rosa speed walked out of his way and through the door, arms swinging at her sides.

From the kitchen Keith could hear soft 70s music playing on the old radio, probably from Rosa's favorite radio station. Keith swept his way in through the kitchen archway and wondered if old music was Rosa's choice of cleaning soundtrack. She enjoyed Shakira and Jason Mraz, Lance had said that, but what else?

Lance finally entered after ten more minutes wearing his boxers, a t-shirt (thank god he'd put one on) and soft blue slippers. He yawned and waddled over to the fridge, swinging it open widely.

Again, her sixth sense triggered, Rosa came pounding her small, yet ferocious body back into the kitchen, this time with a mop in hand. Her jaw was set and square, bottom lip almost puckered out from determination.

"Lance!" She cried, racing to grab her son. "Go! Clean! Abuela is coming and-"

"Mamá , " Lance began, turning slowly and shutting the fridge. "Let

me eat. It's too early, and if I don't have food in my belly I will wither and *die of starvation.*"

Rosa waved her hand as if swatting at a fly. "You can die now, eat later! I need all the hallways mopped and dried before Abuela even sees this house!"

"Mamá , please. Just let me make some food and then I'll be more awake."

For a moment Rosa looked ready to protest, but then she just sighed. "Fine! Fine. You do need to eat. But make it quick- no procrastinating with pancakes!"

With that she was already out of the room, taking the mop with her. As she passed the stairway she screamed a few spanish words at Benji who was still out cold in bed.

"Move your butt, huevon!" was followed by a loud groan echoing from upstairs, and Keith chuckled.

The sound of a frying pan banging against the oven made Keith turn. He raised an eyebrow as Lance sprayed it with cooking spray.

"I thought your Mom said no pancakes?"

Lance gave Keith a sideways smirk, like he had a master plan already put into action. He swung the fridge door open and grabbed a few eggs from the carton. "Yeah, but she didn't say no procrastinating with omelets."

Keith rolled his eyes and went back to sweeping, moving the broom underneath the kitchen island's bar stool legs. After a while Lance moved to switch the radio up a bit louder, swaying his hips to the soft music. Keith forced himself to look away, the past few days evidence to him of what Lance's hips could do.

Danny entered the room a minute later, baby Isabella resting at his hip. The small child was still in her pajamas, footie ones that were purple and designed with flowers. She wore a mess of bedhead, and she was obviously still adjusting to the morning light. She rested her head against her father's shoulder, more cuddly in the mornings.

"Lance," Daniel cried, racing over to his little brother. "I need you to take Bella.

"Now?"

"Right now. Mom's on a rampage and she didn't have time to grab extra food from the grocery store. Rachel's still sleeping so—"

Lance snorted. "Yeah, yeah, just hand my baby over." He immediately handed the spatula to Keith and reached for Isabella, essentially telling Keith to make the omelets. Keith panicked, mainly because he had never made an omelet in his life. Nonetheless, he took the egg covered spatula anyway, practically dropping the broom and racing to the oven.

Bella didn't want to go to Lance at first, crying in protest when she was pried from her father's arms. Daniel grabbed his keys from the hook and waved goodbye, giving his daughter a smile. "Bye, Bella! Be good for Tio Lance."

After a few soothing words and loving coos, Bella slowly began to calm down. Her coffee colored irises widened as she looked around the room, observing the morning and the people around her. She was not only shy in the morning, but also a cuddler, wrapping her small arm around Lance's neck and resting her chubby cheeks against his shoulder.

"Okay," Keith began, having deemed Lance capable to finish breakfast. "Please make this, I have no idea what I'm doing."

Lance chuckled and shifted Bella at his hip. "You can do it, just don't burn the house down."

Keith turned and gave Lance blank, angry eyes. "You know for a fact that I could actually do that. Cut the crap and make your own damn omelet."

With a roll of his eyes, Lance took the spatula. "Fine, I'll hold Baby Bella *and* make you breakfast."

"Wait—" Keith backed away when Lance stole the spatula. "You were making me breakfast too?"

Lance shrugged like that wasn't an issue. With Bella on his left and the spatula at his right, Lance set to work flipping the food with his back turned to Keith. "Of course, you need to eat."

His words were simple, and there was honestly no meaning behind them. Except, Keith couldn't help but feel more. Lance was making

him breakfast, real breakfast, like a real boyfriend, like they'd just had a heated, intimate night and had woken up to eat together.

God. Keith was over thinking and needed to stop.

Except, it didn't help that he got to see Lance in this vulnerable state. Baby on his left shoulder, right hand preoccupied with the spatula, hips swaying again, it was all too much. His brunet hair was upright and spread every which way, a white t-shirt hanging loose to his body, and Keith felt his heart skip a beat.

And then Lance began to sing, his spanish lyrics matching the ones that came from the old stereo. His voice was quiet and hoarse with the last remnants of sleep, definitely off key, but with the intention of modest chorus. He wasn't singing for the fun of it either. His body language revealed to Keith that his words were directed at Baby Bella, singing the chorus to her with a strange love that Keith didn't recognise.

Isabella may not have been Lance's child, but she was family, and he loved her so unconditionally that Keith needed to look away. Bella made Lance an uncle, Bella gave Lance a new role in life. And Lance loved this new responsibility, he took it seriously, he practically reveled in it.

Keith loved it, loved it so much that the swell of his heart hurt, physically ached. It was a pleasant pain, the kind that left you breathless and violently tight. He was seeing something so simple, just a man making breakfast. Yet there was more, it was domestic and intimate and an entire new side that Keith was seeing. This trip was opening Keith's eyes, letting him see fractions of Lance Sanchez that he'd never known were there. He wanted it, ached for it, loved and wished for it. This was something he wanted to see every morning, every day that he woke up, every time he entered their kitchen.

This was a man that Keith wanted in his life.

Which meant that Keith needed to leave, leave the room, get out. The emotion was too much, it was too overwhelming, it was making Keith's breath shift, overstep, he needed an escape.

Without alerting Lance, Keith rested the broom against the wall and left the kitchen, letting his legs carry him towards the front door. He swung it open and forced his body from the house.

Coming here was a mistake. Coming here was a stupid, reckless mistake.

Keith plopped down on the front porch steps and wrapped his arms around his knees, letting his head hang low. This was ridiculous, he needed to get a grip on his emotions and he needed to do it fast. Letting his mind wander into uncharted territory, letting his thoughts make uncontrolled conclusions like that, it would only end in chaos.

A prime example of chaos? Loving Lance. *That* was irrational, that was stupid. He'd only grown intimately close with the Sanchez boy over the course of one week, and already he felt like his heart was his. He may not have realized it until now, but the infatuation was there. And it wasn't even a full love, because love was something that could grow with time. It was a love that had the potential to grow even bigger, even stronger, even more intense, so prominent that it could wreck him when it came crashing down. This whole time he'd been worried about leaving the Sanchez family and missing them, which he would for sure. But it was now that he realized he'd be losing Lance too, and that was just as worse.

He couldn't handle this. He was afraid of love. He didn't understand love. He didn't know *how* to love. He wanted love to get out, he wanted love to disappear, he wanted love to find a grave and bury itself within, he wanted-

"Keith? Are you okay?"

Keith looked up towards the voice immediately, realizing that he'd been on the brink of hyperventilation. His nails had dug into his palms, leaving small indents in the skin.

It was Cleo who spoke, her long hair pulled up into a messy pile at the back of her head. She wore gardener's gloves and dirt stains covered her bare knees. It appeared she'd been weeding the front yard, and he immediately felt embarrassed for having come outside and disturbed her quiet work.

"Yeah," Keith mumbled, taking slow, even breaths to calm himself down. "I'm fine."

Cleo raised an eyebrow and tossed her garden tools into the grass. "It doesn't look like it to me." She took a seat next to Keith on the porch steps and hugged her dirt covered knees. "What's up?"

Keith bit his lip, praying to God that he didn't make it awkward. He

liked Cleo enough, but in this state Lance knew something wrong was bound to leave his mouth.

She was right on the money though, he wasn't okay, and if anything he needed to talk about it. Except, what was he supposed to say? That he was in love with her brother? But that said brother *couldn't know*? It would blow their cover. Cleo couldn't know the truth.

"My emotions are out of whack I guess." He shrugged like it was nothing and kicked at a small pebble with his foot.

"Is it Lance?"

Keith knew he should lie, or avoid any doors opening into dangerous territory. Yet he agreed, only digging himself into a deeper hole. "Yeah."

"Is your crush on him turning painful?"

Keith nodded. "Yeah."

"You think he doesn't like you back?"

"Yeah."

For a moment the two didn't speak, and Keith was completely oblivious to what she'd said. And then he realized.

Wait a second.

Wait a second.

Keith whipped his head around to look at Cleo, his dark eyes wide and thin rimmed. All she wore was a smirk on her face, like she knew something he didn't. Which was true, she *did know something*. She knew everything, absolutely all of it. She knew about the fake relationship, Keith's crush, the unrequited love, everything, and it only made Keith feel intimidated by the fourteen year old.

Cleo was more intelligent than he'd realized.

"I know you guys aren't dating, Keith. I know it's fake."

Keith gulped, suddenly wondering if he'd start to hyperventilate all over again. Bright, red sirens blared in his ears, ringing and screaming to *abort*. *Abort the scene*. He knew he was

blushing, he knew his poker face was gone, he knew his facial expressions only further proved her point. How could she possibly know? Did others know? Had she told others?

"But we *are* dating," He mumbled to her, giving a last minute attempt at protecting his secret, even though he was smart enough to know it would do nothing. "We've been dating for a while."

Cleo shook her head. "I'm pretty smart, Keith. I can tell the difference between two way romance and two way pining." Her voice was soft, obvious that she chose to speak quiet in order to keep the secret.

She was cautious and concerned, and Keith wondered if he could confide in Cleo. No one else in the house had shown any signs of knowing their secret, none until Cleo revealed herself. Keith could only guess that she hadn't told the others. Cleo was smart, that was something Lance had always stressed about his little sister. She would know better than to tell.

Keith finally groaned in distress, banging his head against his knees. He might as well confide in the girl, she was there with open ears.

"It's ridiculous, Cleo. It's ridiculous." His words were mumbled into the fabric of his pants, Keith's cries barely understandable. "I only agreed to be his fake boyfriend for the free laundry and free food! I didn't sign up for this fucked up pining, and his eyes, and his dancing hips, and his dorky love of children, and this ridiculous crush, and all the heart wrenching emotion-"

"Have you tried telling him how you feel?"

Keith looked up immediately, gazing at her like she'd lost her mind. "What? No! That's the last thing on my mind right now. I'm never going to tell him, not in a million years."

"Well," She spoke slowly, her voice soothing despite the curiosity on her tongue. "Maybe you *should* tell him."

Keith shook his head. "No. Hell no, no way, not ever. He'd never want to be my friend again if he'd known I'd taken advantage of him and this trip."

Cleo raised an eyebrow. "Well, have you?"

"No!" Keith yelped this immediately. "I'd never take advantage of

him that way. I would only do anything unless I had his consent. It's just, what I mean is that, like—" Keith began to stutter as he searched for the right words, voice shaky and body going numb. "If he knew that I'd liked him? And also kissed him? And that I'd never said anything?" Keith shivered at the thought. "He'd never talk to me again."

Cleo pressed her lips into a fine line as she thought through his words. "Honestly?" She questioned after a moment. "I doubt he would. He really likes you, Keith. I know my brother."

Keith swallowed, a sudden jolt of anxiety jumpstarting his heart. "Are you saying he likes me romantically? Because I highly doubt that's the case—"

She never missed a beat. "It's something I can't know for sure, and even if I did know, I wouldn't tell you. You need to find that out on your own." Cleo tucked a strand of brunette hair behind her ear while the two were silent. Keith didn't say anything, mostly pondering Cleo's words and examining the small white pearl earrings she wore.

"I'll think about it," He said finally, turning away from Cleo's face. He looked out at the rolling fields in front of them, groups of livestock traveling across the dry grass and desert areas. Despite their conversation somewhat over, the two just sat there and looked at the fields.

Even though they were in the middle of the desert, Lance liked this part of Arizona. The fields were obviously more dry than the ones in Oregon, and most of the farming was done as livestock breeding. Keith remembered taking Mateo on a walk with Lance to go see the neighbor's horses. He'd carried Mateo on his shoulders so the child could see better.

"So," Keith began again, rubbing around his bottom lip. "How did you guess so quickly?"

That made Cleo chuckle, her giggle reminding Keith of bells. She leaned back onto the porch to rest on her hands, some hair moving over her shoulder. "I saw you guys dancing a few days ago. The body language was what gave it away."

Even more embarrassed, Keith blushed under the morning sun. "Is it really that obvious?"

"Nah, I'm just super observant."

"But, like, what body language?"

Cleo tapped a finger to her chin while thinking back. "It was like walking on eggshells. You two didn't have the same comfortable aura that most couples share. Except," She smiled, remembering the song the two had danced to, how Lance had chosen to continue despite the song's sentimental value. "I could see that you both wanted to feel it. The two of you are really close, you just have a hard time seeing it in each other."

"Anyway," Cleo began, standing up and dusting off her hands and pants. "We should probably get back to cleaning or my mother will have both our hides." With an outstretched hand towards Keith she helped the older boy up, and he gave her one final nod.

"Thanks for keeping our secret."

Cleo gave him that same smile from before, and it reminded Keith of one of Rosa's smiles. "Of course. Just make sure you mention me at the wedding."

With that she was gone, having grabbed her weeding tools and disappearing around the side of the house.

Keith took in a deep breath, feeling it rumble in his chest and then escape all over again. A mixture of anxiety and relief flooded his system, both happy and scared that Cleo knew the truth. On one hand, glad because he now had someone to talk to, to confide in, someone who could help protect the secret. However, on the other he was worried, scared because if Cleo could discover their secret, who else could?

For the next hour and a half Keith considered Cleo's words. He finished sweeping the kitchen and moved to vacuuming the carpeted areas, all while contemplating whether or not telling Lance would truly end well. Cleo obviously thought it was a good idea, but was it really?

Keith made his choice when Lance and him were washing windows. They hadn't stopped cleaning since the morning, and had powered through several assignments until they fell to their last and final job: window washing. Lance was persistent that he wash the outside while Keith washed the inside, all for efficient purposes.

In hindsight, washing a dirty window with windex spray didn't sound anywhere near entertaining. If anything it was fabulously dull, a repetition of boring arm movements and screaming at the sun.

Lance had found a way to make it fun, at least for the two of them. Making faces from the other side of the window was included in his tactics, followed by playful teasing games of 'washing' the other through the glass and races to see who could wash a window faster. It was then, watching Lance giggle and make silly faces, that Keith made his final decision. Yes, yes he would tell Lance how he felt. He needed to, because he'd regret it if he didn't. But not until after Abuela was gone. Keith wanted to take on his problems one at a time, not dealing with all at once.

So yes, someday Keith would tell Lance how he felt. And then they'd go their separate ways, and maybe it would end out alright.

Day 7

9:55 A.M.

Lance was fidgeting.

"Dammit, Lance, calm yourself," Keith commanded, poking at the boy's side while looking down at his phone. "Abuela's arrival isn't gonna kill you."

The two lounged across the living room couch, waiting impatiently for a certain seventy year old's entrance. Lance couldn't stop moving, the anxiety and tension of Abuela's doomed arrival only making him panic, shift, move, tick, and fidget. It was becoming unnervingly annoying, and Keith was suppressing the urge to fling a couch pillow at Lance's face.

"You don't know that!" Lance cried, blue eyes round and alert. The other couch cushion was squished in between his arms and chest, hugging the thing like it was keeping him sane. "You've never met my grandmother. She's *batshit crazy*."

Keith rolled his eyes, currently texting the group chat (the day's conversation included dick jokes, game of thrones spoilers, and reasons why Hunk hated being a best man.) Once he sent his text he looked up at Lance, observing the boy cautiously. "Maybe she is, but I highly doubt she'll kill you. Don't be a baby."

Lance kicked at Keith's leg from the other side of the couch, earning a growl. "I am not a baby, Keith Gyeong. I am a smart, mature member of society."

"Let's hope Abuela thinks so." Keith snorted at that, going back to his phone.

It wasn't even two minutes later that the sounds of voices echoed outside the front door. They were loud, one of them widely more vibrant. Keith didn't recognise it in the slightest, though he had a hunch as to why. Slipping his phone into his pocket, Keith and Lance both sat up straighter in their couch cushions.

The door swung open and Keith gasped.

"Well, would you look at this place!"

Abuela.

"She's so..." Keith trailed off, whispering into Lance's ear as he watched the woman enter the room. "...not what I expected?"

Although Abuela Sanchez was still old and withered, there was no doubt she was different than your average grandma. First of all, she looked fit, walking with only the support of a medium sized cane. Second of all, she was tall, even despite the small hunch of her shoulders. Keith discovered that it was the Sanchez side, her side, that must've carried the tall gene to Jaime, moving on to Danny, Lance, and then Cleo. She had a sharp nose, though not as protruded as a witches nose, and her fingers were long and spindly. She wore a plain dress that adorned her thin body, and large pearls in her ears that shimmered under her hair.

Now, despite the physical descriptions that easily fit her grandmother persona, it was the way she carried herself that differentiated. If Keith could use any word to describe her, he'd say she was boisterous. Exuberant. Animated. Lively. Pompous. Arrogant. There were so many things to describe her aura, things that just oozed from every word she said.

"Rosa, I'm impressed! The house looks lovely. Far cleaner than last year." Her hands gripped the handle of the cane tightly, using it as leverage in her walk. Rosa walked next to her, helping as a physical support while Jaime carried in the luggage.

Abuela's voice boomed, and that was something Keith disliked from

the very beginning. He didn't understand how a frail woman could have such a loud, dominating voice. It was thick with a spanish accent, though many syllables rolled from her tongue with ease. Keith could tell she was an intelligent woman, and had at one time been very powerful. Hell, she was still powerful, just one step into the room and she was the center of attention.

The woman inspected the room with large eyes, as if looking for any mistakes. And then she saw Lance, and a smile lit up her tight face. "Lance! Grandson, you are so big! I've missed you!"

Lance stood from the couch and made his way over to her, enveloping the woman in a simple hug. Abuela Sanchez patted the boy's back before pulling him away so she could observe his face. She held his jaw up in front of her, turning it every which way in order to inspect him like a physician.

"Ah, Abuela, can you, uh, please-" Lance stuttered his cries out in protest, though he didn't fight the older woman much when she was tugging at his ears and hair.

"Oh my," She clicked her tongue loudly, pulling at a strand of hair. "You need a haircut. And your ears! Still so big. When you were a baby they were so large." She gave Lance's ear one final tug before letting go of his face, chuckling to herself.

During the entire exchange Keith forced himself to finally stand up, anxious, terrified, and worried beyond reason. He still stood, taking the few steps over to Lance's side.

"Abuela," Lance began, suddenly reaching for Keith's hand. Keith wasn't sure if it was for show or if he genuinely needed someone's hand to hold in that moment. Of course he needed a hand to hold, the man was about to reveal his boyfriend. (Fake boyfriend if you wanted to get technical.)

Keith obliged and the two clasped fingers together, watching as Abuela Sanchez turned her head to look at the two boys. She raised her eyebrows, asking for Lance to proceed.

"Abuela, this is my-" Lance paused, swallowing down air. Keith could see small drops of sweat at the back of his neck. "This is my boyfriend, Keith Gyeong."

In that moment Keith expected something massive. He expected an explosion or the sky to open up, he imagined there to be dying

screams or gunshots, oceans to rise and mountains to fall.

Instead? Instead Abuela Sanchez smiled.

Now, the main question was this: was it a good smile? Honestly, no one was entirely sure. Keith saw several things in that smile, and the very first thing he recognised was its act of cover. It was a show, a front that Abuela had pulled in order to hide her true emotions. And what those true feelings were; no one could say.

However, Keith did not sense a change in aura. Although she was still stiffly cheerful and entirely friendly, it was evident that she didn't know how to respond to Keith. So, as if it was her natural response, she insulted him.

"He is skinny."

Lance looked ready to fall over. "Of course he's skinny! He's Keith!"

Abuela clicked her tongue. "No. If you want to date men, nieto, you must date stronger men. Keith is a shrimp."

Even though her way of introduction wasn't the most pleasant in the world, Keith would've taken being called 'shrimp' any day in comparison to what his original fears held. He'd stayed awake at night, just fearing for when the famous Abuela arrived. He'd been terrified of her being homophobic, of her calling him nasty words, of her making Lance cry all over again.

"If Keith's a shrimp, then I'm a shrimp!" Lance cried, throwing his hands to the air. "I'm skinnier than him!"

Abuela Sanchez swatted her hand at Lance as if to push his words away. "You are allowed to be skinny, he is not." Abuela began to walk towards the couch. "We must fatten him up."

Lance's jaw had dropped. "With what?! You can't force feed him, Abuela!"

Keith laughed at that, relief flooding his system. Abuela wasn't what he'd thought. Was he still scared? Of course. Was he cautious? Most definitely. Was he thankful, thankful that she wasn't as bad as they'd all prepared for? One hundred percent.

Abuela chuckled and sat into the couch cushions, letting her head rest against the soft back. "Oh, I can try."

Lance let his agape mouth shatter closed. If Keith didn't know any better, he looked angry. Why was Lance angry? Angry that his grandmother wasn't as bad as he'd expected? He should've been pleased, he should've been thankful. However, Keith could understand his shock. Everyone was shocked, even Jaime and Rosa, who silently stood at the back of the room with wide eyes.

"Lance," Rosa began, still staring at Abuela Sanchez with wide eyes. "Will you take Abuela's suitcase to the guest room?"

Lance didn't need to be told twice. One moment he was in the living room, the next he was sprinting towards the guest room on the main floor, suitcase in one hand and Keith's palm still held tight in the other.

Once inside the guest room, Lance slammed the door shut behind him. He left his head bang against the white wood, breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth.

Keith observed the guest room, noticing first the yellow walls. The paint was a soft color, reminding Keith of baby yellow. It was a simple room, with only a bed, a dresser, and one lone nightstand in the corner. Despite its simplicity, Keith noticed pushpin holes in the walls, remnants of someone at one time having lived in the room.

The question Keith asked next made Lance halt against the wall, his breath cutting short completely. Keith couldn't help it, his curiosity got the better of him.

"Who stayed in this room before it became the guest room?"

Having realized too late, Keith discovered that he already knew the answer. Painted in pink ink on the wood of the door, right above Lance's head were two words.

Sophia Sanchez.

Keith swallowed down his mistake. "I'm—" He paused, feeling insensitive. "I'm sorry."

Lance sighed and moved from the door, walking over to the simple twin bed and sitting atop it. "Not your fault. You didn't know."

"I've just," Keith bit his lip, turning to look at Lance. The boy rubbed at his neck, like there was painful tension there. "I've just never been in this room."

A shrug. "No one ever is."

Lance tugged at his neck more, rolling his shoulders into the pain. Without thinking Keith crawled behind Lance onto the bed, suddenly placing his fingers at the base of Lance's hairline. Then, with smooth, soothing movements, he began to knead into the muscle.

The sudden impact of skin made Lance release a small groan from his throat. "What-" He sighed into the pleasurable sensation. "What do you think you're doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

Lance moved to whack at Keith, but he only dodged it and put more pressure into the muscle, making Lance groan.

"You're tense, and Abuela's arrival only made you more tense. So I'm giving you a much needed a massage." Keith used his thumbs to rub into the flesh, hoping that the added heat would sooth the knots under the skin.

Lance hummed. "What I really need is a chiropractor."

Keith raised an eyebrow and began to use his elbows. "Do you see any chiropractors around here? I do not look like someone who paid for several years of medical school."

"True," Lance giggled, rolling his shoulders. "But you do look like an emo kid from 2001."

Keith pressed even harder into the muscle, making Lance yelp out in pain. Lance's cries only made Keith smile triumphantly, and it wasn't until Lance swatted at him that he finally stopped.

"So," Keith began, moving onto the side of the bed. "Your Abuela. She is-

"Totally freaking me out?" Lance asked, eyebrows raised. "Yeah. I have no idea what's going on."

Keith flopped his back against the mattress, letting his eyes drift to the ceiling. He noticed that the guest bedroom too had glow stars, just as Lance's old room did. It made Keith shiver just to think of the masked Sophia Sanchez ever counting stars like her brother.

"I thought she would be more, I don't know," Keith sucked in a breath. "Angry? Furious? Break mountains with her screams?"

Lance spun around and flopped onto his back so that he lay parallel to Keith, the two of them lying perpendicular on the bed.

"Nah. That isn't my Abuela."

"But you said-"

"What I said was that she's terrifying. And believe me, she is, in her own way. She's very opinionated, and when you get her to talk about her passions? That's when she gets scary. She's also a critic, and arrogant, and pompous to her core. She may speak loudly and her attitude may make her the center of attention, but she's not one to get angry. Passive aggressive, yes. But not really angry."

Keith bit his lip, letting his hands rest on his belly. So Abuela was still going to be an issue. An issue in her own way, one that Keith was sure they could handle. And if not? They could leave, go back to Oregon, go home. Plain and simple.

"What's the worse that could happen to us?"

Lance shrugged from his place next to Keith. "I'm not sure really. I'm surprised she didn't make any weird comments."

"Well, she sort of did," Keith pointed this out with a laugh under his breath and a smile on his lips. "She called me a shrimp."

Lance giggled at that, still laying flat. Even though the two boys weren't looking at each other, it was an intimate sort of exchange, just laying there with the sun hitting their faces as it fell through the half open blinds.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say my parents talked to my grandmother before hand. She was too..." Lance trailed off for a moment to find the correct word. "Clean. If that's a good word to describe it. The Abuela I know would've spoken her thoughts the moment they came to her mind, but this? She was cautious, and I think it's because my parents talked to her."

"Like," Keith wondered out loud, letting his thoughts speak for themselves. "Like, your dad? Do you think he told her to be respectful?"

Lance didn't miss a beat. "I wouldn't doubt it. He's been....trying. Hard. I've noticed it. He still cringes when we talk about our kissing and he can't really be in the same room as us for longer than ten minutes, but he's definitely trying more than before."

Keith nodded like he understood.

The two boys didn't say much after that, just lay on the bed and stared up at the white ceiling above them, window light warming their skin.

It would be okay.

Keith began to repeat those words in his head over and over, hoping to God that Abuela's intense personality wouldn't result in something wild. He wanted the Christmas to be okay. He wanted to wake up on Christmas morning and watch the Sanchez family open their presents, he wanted to meet all the other cousins, he wanted to eat Christmas dinner, he wanted to do all of it with no issues.

Except, that expectation wasn't realistic. Keith should've known better, he shouldn't have jinxed it.

As the two boys rested on the bed, there was the sudden commotion of a dog barking outside their room. Lance slipped from the bed and opened the door to see Terminator barking viciously at the front door, Mateo waddling over to the door with Greedo in his arms.

"I want to get it!" Mateo screamed behind him, reaching for the door handle with an arm full of iguana.

Now, before the door opened the family had been fully prepared for Abuela's arrival. They'd known in advance, they'd cleaned the house, they'd mentally prepped and readied themselves.

But this? This was worse than any crazy grandmother.

Mateo swung the door open and gave the visitors before him a wide smile.

"Hello! This is the Sanchez house. What's your name?"

The visitor smiled. It was a woman, curly brown hair reaching just past her jaw. Keith was positive he'd never seen her before, but there was something about her that was vaguely familiar. He wondered if he'd seen her in a photograph, or maybe on a photo in

Lance's cellphone camera roll.

And then she spoke, and it was like the world had turned upside down.

"My name is Sophia Sanchez. What's yours?"

Day 7

10:32 A.M.

Up until Sophia's arrival, Keith had been positive he knew what he was getting into. He'd known about the rambunctious family, he'd known about the dangers of meeting Abuela, he'd known about the trials he'd face. It's true there had been bumps that weren't planned. Learning about Lance's family, falling in love with Lance, falling in love with the Sanchez family, growing so attached that he never wanted to leave- all these things he hadn't prepared for. Nonetheless, he'd survived them so far, and he'd made it out with only a few battle scars to show.

Still, the trip wasn't over yet.

And this? Keith hadn't signed up for this drama bullshit. It was like an episode straight from a TV show drama. One moment everyone was panicking about the arrival of Abuela, the next there was the surprise appearance of the mysterious Sophia Sanchez.

Now, Keith knew hardly anything about Sophia Sanchez. She was a mystery girl, the eldest daughter, the child who left the family after the birth of her first child. Keith knew she'd been seventeen when she'd gotten pregnant, but beyond that he was clueless. He knew no context, no backstory, no vital information as to why she left. And now? Now the entire family, Keith included, were all questioning the same thing.

Why did Sophia wait six years to show her face again?

Sophia introduced herself to Mateo like it was nothing. He was her nephew, the one she'd never met, and yet she acted so calm, so contained. Keith didn't understand, and coincidentally, neither did Lance.

Lance's tan face had gone completely pale, almost a sickly green color. He was frozen in place, his muscles no longer allowing him to move. Keith could see that Lance was emotionally compromised,

like something had snapped. He wasn't panicking, just scared, or worried, or some variation thereof.

The two boys watched from the bedroom door, not able to see everything, but able to hear the majority of the conversation. Lance refused to move, and Keith refused to leave his side.

In response to Sophia's original question, Mateo gave a bright, toothy smile. "My name is Mateo! I'm five!" He held out five fingers proudly, almost dropping Greedo in the process. "And this is my iguana. Actually, it's Tio Benji's iguana, but Tio Benji is cool and let's me play with him."

Another voice spoke, one that neither Lance nor Keith recognised. It was younger, high pitched and sweet. "Will the iquana eat me?" The voice sounded out every syllable of iguana.

Mateo giggled before holding Greedo out to the small voice proudly. "No! He eats bugs. Sometimes he shares with me."

"Mateo? Who's at the door?" Rosa's question boomed from across the back of the house, awakening Lance of his trance. He immediately raced from Sophia's old room, taking Keith by the hand with him, his breath heaving as if he needed to warn Rosa.

But it was too late- Rosa took one look at her daughter and went speechless.

It was so quiet that one could hear a pin drop. Rosa and Sophia stared at each other, neither daring to look away. Keith could physically feel the tension, so thick that it could be cut with a steak knife.

Then a voice destroyed the silence, the same twinkle of innocent words from before.

"Mamá , " The voice questioned softly, making everyone turn to the speaker. It was a girl, about one year older than Mateo. A pile of dark curly hair was piled on her head, held back with several rainbow hair clips. She was cute in a strange way, the clothes she wore obviously second hand. However, she wore them extravagantly; yellow rain boots with Minnie Mouse on the sides covered her feet, an old Lilo and Stitch t-shirt, large, thick rimmed glasses that were held on by a string of rainbow alphabet beads, all items she wore proudly.

"Mamá , " She said again, tugging at Sophia's jeans. "Is that woman my Abuela?"

Sophia had no choice but to turn to her daughter, getting down on her knees so they were eye level. "Alexi," She began, taking hold of the girl's small hands. "I want you to go play with this nice boy. His name is Mateo."

Alexi, or the name that Keith now knew her as, puckered her bottom lip in protest. "But what about Abuela?"

Keith couldn't help it, he turned to look at Rosa. Her eyes were rimmed with red, as if ready to cry. It was a strange, mixed emotion read from her face. She was obviously angry, and that was something Keith wasn't accustomed to. She was also sad, the tears falling as she looked down at her granddaughter for the first time. Keith could only imagine the thoughts running through Rosa's head. Here was the girl, this six year old child Rosa had never seen before, calling her Abuela as if they were family. No, they *were* family.

Sophia looked on the brink of tears, and she tucked a strand of hair behind Alexi's ear. The strand was so curly - Sophia's act of love hardly did anything to move the amount of hair from the six-year-old's face.

"You can talk to your- " Sophia halted her next word, closing her eyes to take a short moment. "A-Abuela later. Please go play with Mateo."

Mateo held the iguana close to his body with one hand, reaching the other out to Alexi. "Yeah! I like to play. We can go see my goat and my chickens and my cat. Have you ever seen a chicken?"

Alexi giggled at Mateo and nodded her head. "Of course I've seen a chicken!"

"There are *nine* of them. I counted."

With one last glance towards her Mother, Alexi was lead away by Mateo's hand. Keith watched them go, and for a moment he wished he could join them. He didn't want to be an adult in this situation, he didn't want to be present to the tension that was slowly oozing back. What he did want? For everything to be okay.

However, that is, and always will be, an unrealistic expectation. If

Keith knew anything, it was that life always had negativity. Coincidentally, life always had positivity, as one can not exist without the other.

As soon as Alexi and Mateo turned the hallway corner, Rosa let her head whip around to stare at Sophia again. The tears on her face were drying, yet new ones continued to fall, combining with the anger she held for her lost daughter.

"What's going on here, Sophia."

The sentence sounded more like a demand than a polite question, the words spitting through the gaps in Rosa's teeth. Rosa's small, withered hands were balled into fists at her sides, gripping tightly to her skirt for balance.

Sophia stood slowly, her face neutral in order to hid her true emotion.

"I'm sor-"

Rosa spit out again, voice vicious. " *Don't say you're sorry. Tell me why you're really here. Tell me why you're here, unannounced, showing up with this child that calls me Abuela, tell me what's going on.*"

For a moment Sophia didn't respond, just clenching her jaw and biting at her bottom lip. Then she spoke, her words strangely calm and contained..

"I promise I'll explain. I have an explanation, I do, just -" She paused, turning to stare at Keith. It was as if she'd just realized he was in the room. Even if Keith was unwelcome, even if it was a private affair, it still allowed him to observe her more closely for the first time. She had dark freckles on her nose, similar to Lance, though more prominent. Her nose belonged to Jaime, her eyes belonged to Rosa. Danny and Sophia had the same distinct face shape, her body type reminding Keith of Cleo. She was definitely a Sanchez.

And it was then, as she looked him up and down, noticing Keith's hand intertwined with Lance's, that Keith realized. She hadn't been there when Lance came out of the closet. She didn't know about Lance's bisexuality, and so here Keith was, holding Lance's hand.

Sophia wrenched her gaze away from Keith. "I don't want Lance and

his—" She paused again. "-Boyfriend in the room."

Keith didn't need to be told twice. He wanted out of the room, and now was the perfect opportunity to take Lance's hand and flee. Except, Lance didn't want to run away, that much was evident when he yanked his hand from Keith's grasp.

"No," Lance declared bravely, taking a step towards his sister. "I have a right to know why you're here."

Sophia scowled, a huff escaping her nose. "I just want to talk to mom—"

"Why? This is, what, the first time you've talked to her in six years?"

"Lance," Sophia groaned, running a hand through her curls. "Please don't do this *now*—"

"NO!"

His shout was malicious, making both Rosa and Keith jump from the eruptive noise. Keith shivered just from watching the red in Lance's face. Something told Keith that this was Lance's anger flaring. Lance had been good at keeping his emotions under wraps in other situations, especially when confronting Jaime. Now this, this was something different, like a balloon releasing all its helium into the world. Lance was like that, his inner balloon had finally been popped.

"No," Lance repeated, though quieter. "I *do* get to do this now. I've waited so long to do this, Sophia."

"Lance—" Rosa muttered, her voice held with warning. Lance ignored it, instead clenching his fists.

"You were gone six years. *Six fucking years*. Do you even know what happened in that time?"

"Lance," Rosa ushered again, moving towards her son cautiously. "Please don't do this now."

Lance continued to ignore his mother's warnings, instead focused on his words and the poison that came with them. Keith could only wonder how long Lance had dreamed of this moment, Keith knew he wasn't the only one had felt the way he did. People often dreamed of one day being able to yell at someone who'd wronged

them. It's a sense of justice, a sense of closure that most people crave. So it made sense, at least in Keith's eyes, why Lance would've used this opportunity to let out his anger on his sister.

Sophia bit her lip, staring Lance down with an equal amount of emotion. "I know I was gone, Lance. That's why I'm here now."

Lance hadn't reached a sobbing level yet, though Keith could sense it's oncoming presence with every stuttering breath. Keith wasn't ready to see them, to see the tears, and he was suppressing every urge in his body telling him to do *something*.

Hug him. Hold him. Take him away.

Keith wouldn't do any of those. He refused, because this was Lance's battle to fight, and Lance was going to fight it as he pleased, *alone*.

"But why now? Why not four years ago when I was coming out of the closet? Why not three years ago when Benji was sick and going through chemo? Why did you ever have to leave in the first place?"

Sophia was red in the face, a mixture of embarrassment, sadness, and slight anger. "I know I fucked up, Lance. And I can't take back the past. That's why I'm here, here now, and I'm trying to explain why I-

"You got pregnant, Sophia. And then you left, ran away because you were scared! You ran away to raise your kid and be *stupid*!"

"You don't think I know all of that, Lance! Of course I know it was stupid. I was a teenager, *of course* I was stupid. All teenagers are stupid."

"But that's not an excuse!" Lance cried, jabbing a finger in Sophia's direction. He was truly crying now, fat, alligator tears rolling down his cheeks. "You still did it. And you can't take that back."

Keith wasn't sure what to do, the harsh words thrown back and forth like a tennis ball. It was painful to watch, and he imagined even more painful to endure. But the look on both their faces, the tears under both their eyes, it was equal heartbreak.

"Oh my God, Lance. " Sophia looked ready to push her younger brother. "Can I just, I don't know, explain myself? Maybe I came back home after six years to explain myself, and say I'm sorry, and make things right? I didn't come here to have you yell in my face!"

"But you deserve it!" Lance looked ready to punch a wall, and if he did Keith wouldn't be surprised. His fists were so red, knuckles so white. "You deserve it, Sophia. Because you were my *older sister*. I looked up to you. You were my hero, and I may have been annoying, and you may have thought me a pest, but I *loved you*. And I didn't deserve losing you, especially at a young age like that."

It was like a bomb had dropped, Lance's final words strikingly accurate. They were a slap to Sophia's face, Keith swore he could see an invisible handprint in Sophia's expression.

There were no words spoken from Sophia's lips after that. Silence had settled between the two of them, Sophia too pained to respond, Lance too emotionally drained to speak.

Rosa broke the silence, having been present between their violent words. She looked sad, and it was the type of sad that reminded Keith of a woman mourning. He hated seeing Rosa like that, and if he could do anything to put a smile back on her face, he would do so in an instant.

"Sophia," Rosa whispered, dried tears staining her skin. "Why did you come back now?"

Keith wasn't sure what he expected Sophia to say. The way her face changed, it made him wonder if her next words were truly genuine.

"Alexi," she whispered simply. "It was Alexi. She asked why she had no family. And I guess," Sophia wiped at her tear filled eyes. "I guess it broke my heart a little. Because I couldn't tell her the truth. How the reason was my fault."

There was more silence, and Sophia looked up like she was expecting Lance and Rosa to insult her. None ever came, the two of them completely willing to listen, even if they were emotional. So she continued.

"I have reasons why I never came back. And I could go on and on about them," Sophia was crying profusely now, though her words were still understandable. The woman didn't dare make eye contact with the others, mostly out of embarrassment. "But I can't. Not now. Later maybe, but right now? Can you at least be happy that I'm here? I know you all deserve to hold a grudge. I understand your anger. But I'd rather just be welcomed home to the family I remember, just for now."

Keith wasn't sure what he expected of Rosa. However, if knew anything about the woman, it was that she was forgiving.

Even though Rosa was angry (Keith could see it in her eyes) she still chose to pull Sophia into a hug. Rosa deserved an explanation, she deserved to be furious, she deserved justice, but instead? She chose to be humble. She chose to wrap her arms around her lost daughter like the mother she needed to be.

It was that sort of love that made Keith turn away. It was that kind of love that made him uncomfortable, the kind that scared him. And maybe that's why Keith respected Rosa so much, why he looked up to her. Because she loved her children unconditionally. Lance may have been bisexual, Sophia may have been a rebel, but she loved them. She loved them just as much as the other children, and Keith didn't doubt she would die for them.

So he turned away, taking the stairs one step at a time.

5. Chapter 5

Day 8

Friday, December 23th

11:13 A.M.

It was no surprise how the family reacted.

For the next day Lance only spoke to Sophia if it was required. Benji refused to even look at her. Cleo understood the density of the situation, and although she had been young when Sophia left, she remembered. Danny tried, but it was obvious any contact was painful. Rachel didn't know what to think; the two had never met. Jaime looked ready to cry at every opportunity, and he often would grab Sophia's hand and hold it, no sound escaping him, as if he couldn't believe she was even real. Josie didn't fully comprehend that she had another sibling, and often she would tug on Sophia's pants and ask again, for the twentieth time: *Are you sure you're my sister? Like, one thousand percent sure?*

Rosa tried her hardest to be friendly. And it wasn't that she was *not friendly*, it was simply the sad look in her eyes whenever she noticed Sophia in the room.

Mateo loved the new company, and he especially enjoyed having Alexi as a new playmate. The two of them got along famously, especially when Alexi had revealed to Mateo one of her secrets at the dinner table.

"Mamá," Alexi had whispered, tugging at her mother's sleeve. "I don't like the broccoli. It feels funny on my tongue."

Mateo had gasped loudly at that, shocked that Alexi didn't like his favorite vegetable. "But, Alexi! They are tiny trees! And I'm a giant! See—" He opened his mouth, large enough to show two missing teeth, only to chomp down and swallow down the green top.

Alexi had frowned, almost sad that she couldn't eat the tiny trees. "I want to eat them, but they feel funny."

Mateo had looked at his new friend curiously. "Why do they feel funny?"

Alexi blushed suddenly, red on her cheeks. She turned to her mother with eyebrows raised, as if silently asking for permission. Sophia nodded and nudged her head in a forward motion, signalling her approval. "It's alright, Alexi. You can tell them."

Eyes still large, Alexi turned back to Mateo and whispered loudly behind her small hand;

"I have sensory issues." Then, whispering even louder, Alexi added, "I am autistic."

Everyone in the room had been shocked at that, some of the family members realizing that there was more to Sophia and her daughter than they had thought. There was more to be learned of the small mother and child, and Lance felt a short lived burst of guilt that he was acting so disrespectfully.

However, Mateo didn't seem to care in the slightest. All he saw was another girl to play with. He didn't see differences, he didn't see flaws - he saw a friend.

"What does that mean?"

"Autistic Spectrum Disorder," Sophia explained kindly.

"Oh," He whispered back from the other side of the table. He looked confused, like he didn't understand. Except, in the eyes of a five year old boy like Mateo, a disorder with long words never mattered. All that mattered was that you were nice, that you were willing to play games, and that you were willing to share. So he continued.

"That's okay! Our Abuela can cook the trees to be soft and you won't have sensory issues anymore."

Needless to say, Alexi had been ecstatic at that.

Now, despite Mateo and Josie being the only ones acting friendly, it was Abuela Sanchez who broke the awkward tension. No one had expected her to do it either. Lance and Keith had been on their toes for the past twenty four hours, just praying that Abuela Sanchez wouldn't say anything about Lance's sexuality, and the other family members tried their hardest to have proper behaviours. So it only makes why the family was shocked; they would've never guessed she'd be the one to initiate a truce.

When Abuela first saw Sophia in the Sanchez household, she had

been furious. Abuela had yelled at Sophia for almost ten minutes, all of her words thick, violent, and completely in Spanish. Keith had asked Lance for a translation - Lance had refused.

It seemed that Abuela's tactic in life was to become angry in the very beginning, as if ripping off a bandaid, so that immediately after everything could return as planned. She held no grudges, took in no drama, she was a blunt and straightforward woman with no patience for complicated emotion. As much as her tactics were helpful, they were also insensitive.

Which is why Lance was so worried. Abuela Sanchez was walking in metaphorical circles around the two boys, this time truly letting the drama grow. Lance feared this was her way of waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

Now, never mind worrying about the future, it was what Abuela did in the present that was important. And what did she do? She demanded a family meeting.

Most families don't even hold family meetings, and often it's because they're a pain, out of the way, and inconvenient. But Abuela is a 'sensible' woman, if you'd like to call her that. It's usually her way or the highway, and she took that saying *very* seriously. One thing to note is that family meetings can only go one of two ways; *extremely* good or *terrifyingly* bad. And if Abuela was leading the meeting? Everyone assumed it would be the latter, as Abuela hardly revealed good news.

So there they were, every family member piled into the living room. Some members sat on the couches, others on the floor, younger children on laps. All held their gaze on Abuela where she stood as the center of attention at the front of the room. She wore a tight smile, both hands resting on her cane.

Abuela took a breath. "You are all wondering why I've created a meeting, yes?"

Benji groaned from the floor, soap suds still lingering in his wet hair. He'd been kicked out of the shower for their family meeting, and it was obvious he wanted more than anything to be back under the warm water.

"Well, yeah," Benji spit snarkily, itching at his soapy hair. "I'd like to know so I can go back to my shower-" He turned and gave Cleo a vicious look. "-you know, the one I was rudely kicked from

finishing?"

Cleo shushed her brother with a finger to her lips. "Shut up," she ushered him. "Just let her finish."

Abuela rolled her eyes and spoke again, ignoring the two siblings. "I decided to hold this meeting for one reason; I am very disappointed in my family." She paused as if thinking, though Lance knew his grandmother well enough that it was for dramatic effect.

"You are all disrespectful, selfish people, and I am ashamed."

No one had expected *that* to exit Abuela's mouth. It was common knowledge that Abuela was a loud, pompous woman, but that was downright rude.

"Mamá," Jaime began, sitting up straighter in the arm chair. "I don't understand. Why are we-"

"Shh!" Abuela yelped, her voice harsh and her body language even more so. "I must finish. Do not be rude, Jaime."

Jaime bowed his head, still obedient under his mother's rule.

"As I was saying," Abuela continued. "You are all selfish. The house is sad and there is anger, especially towards Sophia. I will not stay in a home where the family is broken, especially just a few days from Christmas." She then shook her head and clicked her tongue, as if scolding every person in the room.

"You will all treat Sophia with respect. You will push your emotions away. No hard feelings, yes?" Abuela looked around the room with wide eyes, observing each person coldly. When no one answered, she continued, thriving under the spotlight. "I want to set up Christmas. I am here now, so I think we should begin."

One may be wondering why Christmas wasn't already up in the first place. At the beginning of the week Keith had been plagued with the same question, and he'd asked Lance for an answer one morning over their bowls of cereal.

"Don't families do Christmas trees?" Keith had asked, taking a spoonful of cheerios into his mouth. "There's literally nothing up in your house, and even I had *something*."

"Usually we wait until Abuela arrives to set up Christmas." Lance set

down his spoon into his empty bowl. "It's easier that way, because then I can be home from college and by that time Daniel and Rachel drive down from Phoenix."

"But why wait?" Keith asked, finding the notion strange. Wait until a week before Christmas? That didn't seem reasonable with their large family. "Why wait when you can do it after Thanksgiving?"

Lance stood up to place his bowl in the sink. "We have our own weird, wonky family things we do. When Benji was ten my Abuela taught him how to play guitar, and we made it a tradition for the two of them to lead christmas songs while we decorated the tree. It's cheesy as all hell, but Benji has always been super persistent we keep the tradition. He even did it the Christmas of his chemotherapy. Now *that* was a fucked up Christmas." Lance looked thoughtful, as if reminiscing about the past few years. "So yeah, we need Abuela for that. Plus my Mom likes doing the nativity with Mateo and Isabella, and Josie likes having other kids to decorate the tree with."

Keith thought about that, especially when the subject was again brought up by Abuela in the living room. She tapped her cane again, giving off her signature, authoritative gaze.

"Daniel, you will take your siblings to find a tree." Abuela paused. "Sophia will be going too. No exceptions."

No one dared fight her on the matter. Not only was Abuela the boss, but she was also old, and fighting a seventy year old woman with a cane never ended well.

"Then we will decorate the tree and Benji shall play for us. ¿De acuerdo?"

The family truly had no choice. Even if someone had made the effort to rebel against Abuela's wishes, she would've pummeled them into the ground with her wrath.

After all, it was her way or the highway.

Day 8

12:27 P.M.

"How in the hell do tree farms even exist in Arizona? It's a desert, Daniel. A desert."

From the front seat of Jaime's ancient pickup truck sat Danny Sanchez, his hands holding tightly to the old fashioned wheel. Danny was on the brink of blowing his top, all from Benji's obnoxious and repetitive questions. The teenager sat in the front seat with his feet propped up against the dashboard. Despite being told several times to remove them they still remained, as that was the type of boy Benji was.

Sophia and Cleo sat in the backseat of the truck, Lance and Keith huddled next to the two girls with their long legs squished against Danny's seat. The car ride was awkward, that much was obvious. No one dared talk except for Benji, his questions mostly aimed at Danny for teasing purposes.

The trip out to Desert Tree Farms was, in every sense of the word, uncomfortable. It was a sibling trip after all, and every person in the car knew Abuela chose to send them together as part of her master plan. It was for bonding of course, especially between Sophia and the other siblings. Keith hated the fact that he'd tagged along. They weren't even his siblings, and still he was subjected to the torture. The silence was deafening, and fifteen solid minutes of nothing but Benji's puns was about to end them all.

"Trees can grow in the desert, Benjamin." Danny countered this back to his younger brother with spite, using the boy's full name just as Benji had done.

It was quiet again, the soft rumbling sound of the radio humming along with the engine. To break the silence Danny moved to turn the stereo up, the crackling static only growing louder. He skimmed through a few stations, skipping over a couple, and was just about to switch from another when Lance immediately stopped him.

"Danny, wait!"

Lance hadn't said a single word the whole car ride, so it surprised all of them when he'd yelled so suddenly. He'd been rather solemn since Abuela's family meeting; Keith wasn't sure what had bothered him so.

Moving forward in his seat, Lance reached for the radio and turned it up again. A crooked smile slowly grew on his cheeks, like he knew something the others didn't. That solemn look had somehow disappeared - all due to this song.

Keith didn't recognise the tune, but as the chorus came into

repetition he finally realized.

"Oh my god," Daniel declared, probably having the same thoughts as Keith. "Lance I swear to God if you even start-"

It was too late. Lance had heard the song, the beat had played, the song was set, the volume was up. Keith banged his forehead against the seat in front of him, both Daniel, Cleo, and Sophia groaning in protest.

"¡Mamita yo se que tú no te me va' a guitar!"

Danny complained loudly into the steering wheel. "Gasolina is the worst. This isn't even the good version!"

As Danny moved to change the station, Lance whacked at his hand, a silent threat to not change the damn station. Lance continued to sing (or rap? Was it rapping? Keith wasn't fully aware of the logistics.)

Lance turned to Cleo and began to wiggle his eyebrows, shaking his hips while sitting in place. "¡Mi gata no para de janguiar porque! Come on Cleo be my backup singer when the chorus comes!"

Cleo forcefully pushed Lance's face out of her personal space, expression blank. "I might've said yes when I was like, six. I didn't even understand the lyrics then."

Lance made a pouty face and turned to Benji, poking his brother in the shoulder repeatedly. "Come on, Benji-Boo. You know you wanna."

Benji rolled his eyes, that familiar smile on his face. They all knew Benji wanted to join in, that much was obvious. He did just that when the chorus came, the two boys singing in time with each other.

"¡A ella le gusta la gasolina!"

"¡Dame mas gasolina!"

"¡Como le encanta la gasolina!"

"¡Dame mas gasolina!"

The song continued to play, and with each lyric the two boys

became more boisterous, more wild, more like children. Benji jumped around in his seat, rapping along and singing backup to Lance's two had started to dance, and Lance never once missed a lyric. He knew them all, and continued to spit them out like they were born on the tip of his tongue.

Keith couldn't help it, the exchange between the two brothers was cute, and he noticed that Cleo was having a hard time repressing her smile.

"¡Ella prende las turbinas!"

Keith giggled, no longer able to contain his reaction. "How long have you had this memorized?" Keith questioned, moving around in his seat to watch the two boys.

Benji turned fully around to look at Keith, Lance still singing in the background as he spoke. "We all have it memorized, have since we were younger. Danny taught it to us, he just pretends to hate it." Benji paused, then added, "Sophia too. She was really good at the fast part."

Keith raised an eyebrow and looked over at Sophia. She was blushing, embarrassment displayed in on her freckled skin. The countryside sped behind her through the window, yellow fields and mountains in the background.

"Really?" He questioned her, hoping that he wasn't too intimidating.

"Y-Yeah," she muttered, obviously uncomfortable with talking, though slowly coming out of her shell. "All five of us used to annoy my mom by singing it at the dinner table." She looked reminiscent and almost sad at the memory. Keith wondered how many years ago that had been. At least six, at least before Sophia had left their family. He secretly wondered if Sophia even remembered the lyrics.

"¡Anda en carro, motoras y limosinas! ¡Anda en carro, motoras y limosinas, llena su tanque de adrenalina!"

The boys continued to move through the lyrics, and soon Cleo joined in. Keith was impressed that the fourteen year old could know the lyrics of the older song by heart, and he tried to imagine a six year old Cleo learning the song from her older brothers and sister.

"¡A ella le gusta la gasolina!"

"¡Dame mas gasolina!"

"Sophia!" Benji cried, tugging on his sister's arm. "You need to do the next part."

Sophia's brown eyes were wide like an owl's; it was obvious she was against the idea. She looked out of her element, out of place, like she'd been plucked from sleep and was only half-awake. Except, never mind being against the idea - she was just shocked that Benji had even asked such a question. For the past day and a half Benji had ignored his older sister, and had held his grudge high. They'd barely spoken, barely even looked at each other. And now?

Suddenly Benji wanted her to join his reggaeton group.

Sophia bit her lip. "But, but why?"

Benji rolled his eyes, tuning out both Lance and Cleo's singing. "I'm still mad at you, okay? But I can't be a dick 24/7. Just do it like when we were kids and maybe I'll talk to you again."

"¡A ella le gusta la gasolina!"

"¡Dame mas gasolina!"

The part was coming, Keith could sense the bass drop, the music's tension growing with every word. He wondered if Sophia would even do it, the look she wore proof that she was thinking the same thing.

"¡Como le encanta la gasolina!"

"¡Dame mas gasolina!"

And then it dropped, and suddenly Sophia was spitting out words, the words spewed from her mouth like gunshots, each word completely even with the beat, every one accurate and in time.

"Aquí nosotros somos los mejores, no te me ajores, en la pista nos llaman los matadores, haces que cualquiera se enamore-

Keith couldn't help the smile on his face, and he realized that everyone in the car wore similar expressions. Lance howled in approval, Benji began to clap, Cleo beaming so brightly that Keith feared her smile could blind him. Danny even joined in, and for a moment, just a single moment, the whole group forgot about their problems. They forgot about grudges, and anger, and bitterness.

There was just the song, and the sentimental value a song like this held. Keith may not have known the siblings when he was younger, but just being in the car during the song was like living their childhood right along with them.

"Cuando bailas al ritmo de los tambores, esto va pa las gatas de todos los colores, Pa las mayores, pa las menores, pa las que son más zorras que los cazadores"

This was the Sophia that they had known. This was the Sophia who gave her little brother's noogies, this was the Sophia who wanted to dance ballet professionally. This was the Sophia Keith saw in the photographs, the girl who lived in that yellow painted bedroom with the pushpin holes. This was the Sophia her siblings knew, this was the girl they'd loved.

Keith wasn't sure what it was that Sophia had done to deserve her family's hate. No one had addressed it publicly to him, Lance had been too uncomfortable to release that information. Keith just didn't know, plain and simple. And was Keith going to push for the knowledge? No. Because as the car full of kids drove down that farm road, passing by spreads of dead field, animals, trees, old barn houses, as they rapped to a classic Spanish hip hop song, Keith decided he was going to like Sophia.

This Sophia he liked - it was the only Sophia he knew of so far. He liked how she rolled her shoulders with every word, how she spoke with her hands, pointing them to the beat. He liked how she treated her daughter like an equal, how she had a bond with Alexi not much different than the one Rosa shared with the other children.

He liked how she was human. Sophia had made a mistake, just as everyone does, and although Keith didn't know the full mistake, she had paid the price. She was still paying the price. But she was trying, she wanted to fix things, she wanted to redeem herself.

And in Keith's book? In Keith's book that was okay.

Day 8

3:21 P.M.

Danny and the other tree goers arrived back to the Sanchez house hours after dinner. They'd stayed out far longer than they'd been allowed, due to a certain few of them (Benji and Cleo) initiating a game of hide and seek in the Christmas tree field. That game had

lasted hours, eventually morphing into a game of tag. Lance and Keith's competitive nature had lead them into forming alliances, in the end creating two teams. For the record; Keith, Cleo and Danny won. They'd also picked up McDonalds on the way home (against Keith and Danny's wishes) and in the end the whole group got McFlurries.

Despite arriving three hours later than planned, they still managed to deliver a quality tree to the house. It was a good fit, a tall one with a medium width. Benji and Lance had bickered profusely over which tree to choose, and in the end Cleo chose promptly out of spite.

"So," Rosa called as she came out of the garage to greet them, a Christmas apron tied around her torso. It appeared they'd retrieved the christmas boxes from the attic. "Did you all have fun?"

Her question was answered when Sophia and Benji revealed themselves from behind the truck, Benjamin positioned under Sophia's nasty headlock. The boy was cackling at something he'd said, Sophia merely reacting with a smirk on her face.

Rosa raised an eyebrow at Danny, asking for an explanation. Obviously she needed one, not only five hours ago the two siblings refused to speak to each other.

"Bonding, Mamá ." Danny shrugged and slammed the truck door behind him. "It worked."

After several motherly scoldings from Rosa, the group was finally able to calm down and transport the tree from the bed of the truck and into the living room. Josie and the other children squealed when the large tree was placed in the living room, Mateo already wearing antler ears on his head.

"Keith!" Mateo screamed, racing to grab the older boy's pants. "I'm a reindeer, see?" He pointed to the antlers on his head, most likely a head piece the child had found at the very bottom of a christmas box. It looked around fifteen years old, wire poking through the faded fabric.

Keith smiled down at the boy and ruffled his hair, messing up the antler ears in the process. "You just need a red nose and you'll be Rudolph."

Mateo suddenly gripped Keith's hand, pulling him towards the other

boxes. "You need one too! We are boyfriends, Keith. Boyfriends always match."

Keith chuckled at that, realizing that he was already roped in. He'd have no choice now, there'd be antlers on his head in record time.

Once Benji grabbed his guitar from the bedroom, the family jumped into the festivities. Keith discovered that Benji was a very talented guitar player, and additionally had a soothing singing voice, far different from when he rapped. Although it wasn't the most beautiful voice in the world, Benji was far more musical than Lance. Benji and Abuela Sanchez led several songs, Spanish and English versions of each. Keith particularly enjoyed the ones in Spanish, as he loved listening to Rosa sing in her native tongue. She was a wonderful singer, though her voice was a lot deeper than expected, and often the words rolled off her tongue pleasantly. Keith found that he loved listening to Rosa, as her smile glowed just a tad brighter.

There were numerous decorations, all of them ancient and held with sentimental value. There was a medium sized nativity set that Rosa took a special loving to, or a 'nacimiento' as the family called it. It was made of clay and placed on the fireplace, surrounded by holly and Christmas lights. Rosa told Keith the story of how it had belonged to her mother, and her grandmother before her. She'd chuckled heartily when mentioning how Benji, Lance VC and their cousins had gotten in trouble as children for accidentally dropping the baby Jesus piece. (Keith had giggled at this, especially because you could still see the crack lines from when the piece had been superglued back together.)

As the night went on and the tree had been decorated, many of the family members settled down to sit on the couches and pillows around the tree. Abuela brought out some boxes of Mexican chocolate, and after a while Benji switched from christmas songs and moved to fast paced, dancing ones. There was no more singing, and instead the younger kids ran around in circles, dancing and kicking their feet to the music.

Keith wasn't sure how it happened, but at some point through the night he found his way into the children's dancing circle. The children demanded that they dance around him in a circle, screaming at the top of their lungs, "Dance, Keith, dance!"

Now, keep in mind, Keith doesn't consider himself the greatest dancer. He also hates dancing in front of other's eyes (Especially in

front of Abuela, he could feel her glaring into his skull.) So it only makes sense why he turned into a stuttering, blushing mess when Mateo pulled him into the circle the small boy had created with Josie and Alexi.

Keith didn't want to dance. But this was Mateo, and Keith would do anything for Mateo. So there Keith was, dancing awkwardly in the circle, all three children giggling and cackling like it was the funniest thing they'd ever seen. Their chuckles rang like bells, only growing louder with each spin Keith made.

Lance watched from the kitchen with his eyes preoccupied, all while chewing on an ibarra chocolate. Completely oblivious to his own actions, Lance watched Keith twirl and spin. He hummed contently into his chocolate, letting himself spy on a blushing Keith.

"You love him. Don't you."

Cleo's voice startled Lance, making him jump and drop his ibarra. He scowled down at his younger sibling, snatching the chocolate up before she could grab it.

"Scaring people is rude, Cleo."

She smiled at him, innocent and sweet. "So is spying."

Lance frowned at that, looking away and back at Keith. "I wasn't spying."

"Uh huh." Cleo chuckled and plucked a piece crumb from Lance's chocolate, only to pop it in her mouth. "And I'm the President. Listen Lance, you don't have to deny your feelings for him."

Lance turned to look at Cleo, an eyebrow raised. "I-I don't. We're already dating."

For a moment Cleo looked skeptical, her eyes trailing around the room. The rest of the family was preoccupied, Rachel videotaping the children's dance and Rosa clapping along to the beat. Then she turned her head and whispered quietly, just low enough so that Lance could hear, "It's okay. I know you aren't dating."

Lance squeaked. "You fucking WHAT-"

Cleo clamped a hand over Lance's mouth to shut him up. "Listen," She whispered, turning her head to make sure none of the family

was watching. "Calm yourself down and be smart, idiot. I've known for a while, and I've kept your secret. Keith already knows, I told him." She let her hand fall from his face.

Lance swallowed down a gulp up air, his next words stuttering on his tongue. His eyes darted between Cleo and Keith, the boy who was now spinning Mateo around to the song.

"I-I don't love him, Cleo. He's just a friend."

Cleo's eyes were curious, but also vibrantly pained. The gears of her mind were rotating rapidly, like she was thinking about things Lance himself could never understand. "Are you sure?"

Was he sure? Lance was a confused man, often his emotions got flooded in the mix of other thoughts. Did he love Keith? Lance didn't even know himself. He wanted to know, and often when he watched Keith, stole a glimpse, caught himself staring, he'd feel warmth in his stomach. He liked the little things Keith did. Keith would hold Mateo's hand and look in the five year old's eyes when talking, that was something Lance liked. Lance liked that Keith had become completely devoted to Rosa as if she herself was his mother. Keith was a fast learner, and he had the drive and determination to get things done. Lance liked his laugh, his smile, when he blushed, how he always had to brush his teeth morning and night, how he refused to drink his milk when his cereal was finished, his attention to detail, his soft spot for children no matter how often he denied loving them. There were a lot of things he liked about Keith Gyeong.

That didn't mean love though. Right?

Lance bit his lip, again watching Keith in the living room. The children were now taking turns having Keith swing them, and the fact that Keith had continued to play their game brought a smile to Lance's face.

"I don't—" He swallowed, taking in one last image of Keith's laughter. "I don't know if I do. But if I did love him? I wouldn't act on my feelings, not yet. Probably not ever."

Cleo placed a hand on her brother's shoulder, brown eyes holding something that Lance could've mistaken for sadness. She was distraught, at a loss. But she didn't push him, instead squeezing his shoulder one last time.

"When you finally decide, you should tell him."

Cleo left her brother's side, walking back into the living room with a mug of hot chocolate for Abuela. Lance stuck another piece of chocolate into his mouth and let his eyes trail over to Keith again. Benji had put his guitar away, leaving the children with no other option than to tackle Keith to the ground in a fit of giggles. Keith had played along, strangely gifted with enough stamina to handle the children's wrath. The children attacked Keith with tickles, causing him to cry out in surrender.

Lance didn't know what he was feeling. Love? Something platonic? Lance didn't know, and he was wracking his brain trying to figure it out. The week had delivered too many emotions, and right now falling in love with a boy was just one obnoxious, unwanted edition.

For now Lance would go throughout the week as planned. He wouldn't think about emotions, or love, or feelings, or Keith's laugh, or anything thereof. He would only think of surviving his family for one more week, and nothing more. And then maybe, just maybe, he'd let his heart do the thinking.

6. Chapter 6

Day 9

Saturday, December 24th

Christmas Eve Day

12:12 P.M.

Keith hadn't bought Lance a gift.

Christmas day was *tomorrow*.

At the beginning of Keith's trip the thought would've never occurred to him. Buy Lance Sanchez a Christmas gift? Never. Keith might've done so at university if he were forced to, but never of his own free will.

Things were different now. Lance and Keith were closer, more comfortable, more intimate. Before their trip it never felt like presents between the two were needed- their rivalry was enough to wager that. Things had changed, the trip had altered something between them. A present felt more than necessary- it felt required, expected.

What sort of thing did you buy for a guy like Lance anyway?

Keith grappled this question as he lounged on his (Lance's) bed. His laptop sat open on the mattress, screen displaying the dreaded Christmas break homework he'd been procrastinating. Keith was currently hiding; the arrival of Lance's cousins had brought too much noise for him to think straight. The new cousins - three of them from Jaime's sister and two from his brother- were all friendly and exciting additions to the chaotic household. The house was already bursting at the seams; an addition of two families labeled the basement occupied.

Keith had been introduced to the like as Lance's boyfriend, just as always. He'd shaken several hands, said hello more than five times, received a hug from Lance's aunt - all before he was off to hiding in the bedroom.

With the arrival of the Sanchez extended family came the promise of larger dinners, rowdier mealtimes, less personal space, and an

increasing hype for Christmas day. Keith wasn't sure if he could survive.

Keith closed his course workbook rather forcefully, having made a decision that he was too distracted to be productive. He couldn't find Lance's gift on his own, and the noise downstairs was too distracting to think straight.

Staring at the shine of his closed laptop, Keith contemplated present ideas. Keith was always bad at giving gifts, but this gift for Lance had to be special. It was Keith's last opportunity to *really* give him something before they 'broke up' back at uni, and that meant it needed to be more than Keith's signature shampoo and conditioner set.

Letting his socks pad down the corridor, Keith moved towards Cleo's ajar bedroom door and knocked. He knew for a fact she was hiding in there - he'd seen her escape after being bombarded by the dreaded Aunt Cassie.

Keith had only been inside Cleo's bedroom a few times before; each time always felt like his first. The room was small, but it was the amount of posters that made it even smaller. There were probably over a hundred, all of them plastered to her walls and ceiling. The majority of them were images of stars, each poster displaying a different nebula or gas giant. Keith remembered the first time he saw the posters. Cleo had described in great detail her love of astronomy and her dream to one day become an astrophysicist.

"Hey," Keith muttered, noticing that Cleo wasn't alone. Sophia sat next to her on the bed, the two girls obviously related when you sat them side by side.

"Hey," Cleo answered, a small smile tugging at her lips. "What's up?"

"I-" Keith paused awkwardly, realizing they must've been in deep conversation. He couldn't help but feel he'd interrupted something important, something special between the two of them alone. "I can come back later if you guys are-"

"No," Cleo voiced firmly, moving closer towards Keith on the bed. "It's okay, we just finished." Sophia nodded her head in agreement, though she was silent.

"It's sort of hectic downstairs." He swallowed, feeling strangely embarrassed. "I was wondering if I could..."

Cleo nodded her head with a chuckle. "Sit down." She motioned for Keith to sit on the bed and moved to make room. He obliged, crossing his legs over the soft quilt.

"It's so *loud* down there," Keith whispered, pulling at the quilt's yarn ties.

"It'll only get louder," Cleo confirmed. "I'm just trying to take in a few quiet moments before I go back to chaos."

Cleo's reference to 'chaos' was none other than dinner prep. Christmas dinner for the Sanchez was Christmas Eve night, or 'Nochebuena'. Such a feast had been explained to Keith before hand. Rosa and Jaime had partnered up for the food preperation battle, recruiting all their children into their army. Both Keith and Sophia had been invited to help as well - even if Keith messed up several times and tension between Sophia and the other siblings lingered.

So," Cleo began, stretching her legs across Keith's crossed knees.
"You ready to be completely torn apart tonight?"

Sophia spoke up, her voice politely quiet. "Wait, who's tearing Keith apart?"

"Lance, obviously." A wicked smile plastered Cleo's cheeks. "I was thinking mistletoe pranks."

Keith blushed, the red erupting as it always did. "You wouldn't dare."

"Oh, I would."

"Speaking of Lance," Keith began, trying desperately to change the subject before Cleo accumulated any more ideas. "I don't have a gift for him."

Cleo gaped, launching up from the bed like a jack in the box. "You *what?*!"

Keith nodded, though his blush had returned into something more sheepish. "I have absolutely *no* idea what to get him."

"Have you asked him what he wants?"

Shaking his head, Keith continued, "I've never been good at this sort of thing. I forgot that giving presents was even a tradition until a

few hours ago and-"

"I can take you to get something."

Keith blinked, shocked that Sophia had even instituted the idea. She showed no hint of second thoughts, instead smiling at Keith all genuine.

"I don't mind - I have a car, Alexi's with Mateo, and we can escape without the others knowing."

Keith wasn't sure if that was a good idea. It wasn't that he was particularly against it; a trip to the store *would* be helpful. What Keith *was against* was the awkwardness he knew for a fact would be present. A car ride. Alone, with Sophia, the woman he had met only twenty four hours prior. All to get his fake boyfriend a christmas gift that he *forgot about*. How pleasant.

Except, underneath that layer of amiable cheeks, Sophia's question turned into something more than just an offer. It was a request, like she wanted him to come with her. Like she *needed* him to agree.

Maybe that's what lead Keith to say yes.

So here he was, sitting in the passenger seat of Sophia's old sudan. The two were headed towards Payson, the closest town with a real Walmart. Five minutes into their drive, and Sophia decided to pop a Tchaikovsky CD into the car's music player.

"Classical." She confessed, pressing play on the radio and turning the volume down to a soft hum. "It's my favorite. Reminds me of my dancing days."

Keith raised a curious eyebrow. "You danced?"

Sophia nodded. "Eleven years of it. My Mamá put Lance, Danny, and me into classes when we were kids."

Keith smiled at the thought of Lance being in a ballet class. It wasn't surprising- the boy knew how to move.

"The boys stopped early on, but I kept going," Sophia continued, her face reminiscent. "I loved every moment of it- I even dreamed of dancing in New York."

The mental image of a younger Sophia entered Keith's mind, one

filled with pointe shoes and leotards. It was a pleasant image; Keith could almost picture Sophia's curls pulled into a tight bun on her head, or her arms held into first position.

"Why didn't you follow the dream?"

It wasn't until a few seconds later that Keith recognised the blunt, almost disrespectful way his words had come out. He instantly regretted them.

"I'm sure you can figure that out for yourself." Sophia smiled sadly.

Keith felt guilt for bringing up the subject, the kind that pulled at heartstrings. Why had he been so blunt? He blushed, knowing fully well how red his cheeks were.

"I'm sorry," He swallowed, feeling the hallows of embarrassment trail down his throat.

"Don't be. I'm sure you're curious about my sob story. But you know," She paused, relaxing her shoulders against the driver's seat. "It's not actually a sob story. Not really."

Keith tiptoed around his words. "How so?"

A pause. "I'm not sure you'd wanna listen."

He did. He did want to listen, and it wasn't because he thrived on drama. It was because there was something there, something hidden behind Sophia's mystery that he so desperately wanted to learn. Lance described Sophia out to be this terrible sister, one who'd betrayed him and was banished from the family. But Keith was smart; there was more to it than that. Sophia had her own side of the story to tell, and he wanted more than anything to hear it.

"Can you-" He muttered, ignoring the rolling fields behind the window. "Can you tell me the story? If you don't mind."

Sophia raised an eyebrow, and after a few moments of silence, she began.

"I got pregnant at seventeen - I'm sure you know that part. I won't go into the details of the situation - all you gotta know is that running away wasn't something I wanted to do."

"Wait-" Keith began, eyes round. "How? You didn't want to run

away?"

Sophia nodded. "I ran away of my own free will of course, but it was my Dad who pushed me to do so. He was angry at me, furious for a long time. We fought constantly, and it was during our worst fight that he just told me to leave. I think he regretted it afterwards; but in the moment? I don't know. All I know is I left."

There was a pause, and Keith wondered if she'd keep going. She took a breath, and as their car merged onto the Highway 65, she continued.

"I may have been reckless as a teen, but I don't regret having Alexi. Not in the slightest. She helped me realize that life isn't a shithole. I know that sounds weird, because my life *was* a shithole. But Alexi? She was what made it worthwhile. She helped me learn not only about responsibility, but that despite the mistakes I made, I couldn't dwell on them. Dwelling on them would only pull me down, and living homeless and with a newborn child wasn't a good time to fall apart."

Sophia swallowed, and Keith could see her knuckles whiten on the wheel.

"I don't want to talk about the mistakes I made, how they occurred, or why they happened. I'm not ignoring them. I acknowledge that what I did was a mistake, and that running away was wrong. What I *do* want to talk about is the things I did that I'm *proud of*. I think that's something I learned while I was away; the fact that dwelling in the past is never a good thing. And it isn't the future we should dwell in either; it's the *now*. I spent so much time hating myself for the things I did. I ran away out of shame; I never came back out of that same shame. But as I struggled to take care of Alexi, I realized that I needed to focus on the present. I couldn't change that I'd gotten pregnant, and I couldn't change how having a child would affect my future. What I could change was how I *reacted* to each trial, each issue, *all in the moment* ."

She stopped talking again, all as if to catch her bearings. Keith wanted more, needed more. He was impatient; he wanted to understand beyond what he knew.

"How'd you do it," Keith muttered. "If you don't mind me asking."

A bite to the lip. "When I ran away I hid with this older friend of mine. She was a student attending community college up in

Phoenix. She worked at the college as a cook in the cafeteria - some work study thing. It was through her that I got a job cleaning dorm halls. I'd bring alexi and sit her down in one of those bouncer seats."

Sophia laughed at that, reminiscing a time when baby Alexi would make gurgles and bubbles as her mother worked. Even Keith smiled, an idea so simple and so intriguing.

"Eventually I enrolled in the school with my savings. I'm still attending, but next summer I'll finally finish my associate's degree. Then it's my bachelors, and I'm hoping to get into medical school." She took a halt, all to beam so widely Keith wondered if her cheeks would rip. She was so proud of herself, Keith realized. She didn't need other people to push her forward - Alexi and her own personal success was all she needed.

"I'm gonna be a psychiatrist."

It was amazing, being honored with Sophia's story. Keith could barely believe she'd been willing to tell him, let alone open up so easily. It was such an intimate story, so personal and unique that Keith feared he'd taint it with his stranger's hands.

Still, it was Sophia's story to tell, and it was Keith she had chosen to reveal it to. The way she spoke was magnificent; it was obvious how far Sophia had come. What made it even more impressive? The fact that she knew how far she'd come, and she was *proud* of it. Sophia had been through fields of decay, trials and turmoil Keith was positive he could never face. Except here she was, smiling, breathing, living with this sense of pride that she rightfully deserved.

"And Alexi?" Sophia continued. "Alexi was there the whole way. She'd color while I studied, she'd practice her letters while I studied for exams. It was like we were partners; we were always there for each other. And her autism? It's true that it's hard, I won't lie about that. Lying about that is ignoring the reality. But it's a piece of her. I only felt it right that I accept the autism alongside every other piece that makes Alexi up. I think that's why I taught her about the spectrum from a young age. I didn't want her to grow up confused and conflicted, I wanted her to know and to understand it, to not be afraid of it. I wanted her to learn that she can be on the spectrum and still be my Alexi."

It was then that Keith realized how close Sophia was to crying. They weren't sad tears either - happy ones, ones that were so warm

they even filled Keith's chest.

"That's why I don't consider it a sob story - my story isn't sad. It may have had a rough beginning, but the story isn't over. It's still happening, and I've survived through every awful chapter."

Keith wasn't sure what to say when Sophia finished; it was obvious she was done from the silence that filled the front seat. It wasn't so much awkward as it was peaceful, and Keith's thoughts spiraled out of control.

At the beginning of the trip, when Keith had learned of Sophia, his first impressions had been solely negative. Lance had spoken of his older sister only with anger and bitterness, therefore placing ideas in Keith's head of a sister who was the black sheep. He imagined a sister who had gotten pregnant at seventeen, a wild, rebellious, bully of a sibling who didn't know how to make mature decisions.

Sophia wasn't even close to that.

Sophia was hero worthy. Sophia was the kind of woman that made Keith's heart tingle. She was more than just a girl who got pregnant at seventeen, she was a *human*. A human who had made mistakes, taken a good look at them, and accepted them for what they were.

In Keith's book that put her at the top of the list.

"That's why you finally came back," Keith whispered, letting his eyes bore holes into the woman beside him. "It was more than Alexi wanting to see her family. You finally felt worthy enough to come back."

Sophia nodded, and she finally turned to look at Keith. "It took a long time for me to get to that point. When I could finally recognize it? I knew I needed to come back. I'm just trying to find the right time to tell my family that. And you know," She smiled, one so bright that Keith feared he'd burn. "I'm glad you chose to take this car ride with me. I needed to practice bearing out my soul *before* I faced the neverending wrath of my family."

Keith smiled. "It's easier to talk to a complete stranger than to talk with the ones you love. Right?"

"Exactly," Sophia agreed. "So. What kind of present for Lance did you have in mind?"

Day 9

Christmas Eve Day

1:05 P.M.

Keith had always known he was a bad gift giver. It was just a part of his nature, a fact about himself he could name off in a heartbeat. It was almost a running joke among his friends; everyone knew Keith's gift giving knowledge lacked enormously. The last time he'd given anyone a gift was to Shiro, and he'd bought the guy cleaning supplies for their dorm room.

So yeah; Keith needed major help.

Keith popped his head around the corner of a Walmart clothing rack, a cheetah print jacket in hand. "What about this?"

Sophia raised an eyebrow at him and set down a shirt she was admiring. She spoke hesitantly, as if walking around her words to be kind. "Are you, um, sure that he'd like that?"

Keith groaned and hung the jacket back up, already on to the next rack. "You don't have to be nice about this. I know I'm terrible at shopping for gifts."

"You're not terrible."

Keith sighed and pulled out an ugly shirt adorned with a glittery frog, only to stuff it back into the sea of clothes. "I'm terrible. Admit it."

Sophia sighed and leaned against their shopping cart, arms resting over her purse. "That's because you're thinking about this the wrong way. You need to get him a gift he'll cherish, not a cheetah jacket he can embarrass himself in. He's your boyfriend."

Keith nodded like he understood, though he couldn't help but feel at a loss. Lance *wasn't* his boyfriend, and maybe that was the issue. Dating meant you could buy your partner sentimental things; presents that meant you cared, gifts that showed your love. If the two boys were truly dating, then maybe he *could* buy those things. Instead Keith was at a standstill, walking aimlessly around a busy walmart with no plan in mind.

After a moment of silence, Sophia kindly offered; "What kind of

things does he like?"

Keith hummed, thinking out loud. "Well, he likes Star Wars. And anime, ridiculous amounts of anime. And, I don't know, memes?"

"Memes?" Sophia chuckled, now moving the cart out of the clothing aisle and towards the back of the store.

"Memes," Keith assured her, watching for anything in the aisles Lance might like. "He also really loves cringy music? Like, stuff that you're not supposed to play outside your bathroom."

As if a thought had just occurred to her, Sophia abruptly stopped the cart. Keith rammed into the metal rack with an 'oof, rubbing his hand when Sophia spoke.

"I know *exactly* what you should get him." A smile had grown on her face, both triumphant and rather excited.

"Is this," Keith paused, feeling hesitant. "Is this a boyfriend sort of gift? Or a Lance sort of gift?"

Sophia smirked even wider. She switched the cart's directions entirely, shifting them a whole one-eighty degrees. The two maneuvered around the bustle of other Walmart shoppers, almost crashing into a small family on their way.

"Both," She declared, out of breath as she pulled up in front of the electronics department. "Definitely both. Now," She turned to Keith, adventure gleaming at the crinkle of her tired eyes. "Does your laptop have a CD drive?"

Day 9

Christmas Eve Day

1:05 P.M.

Walmart was busy. No, more than busy; it was *hell*.

Sophia and Lance could've left the building long ago, could've already been home. But no. Besides Lance's gift - one that he was still unsure about - Keith also had his heart set on finding gifts for other Sanchez family members. It wasn't that Keith wanted presents in return. No, if anything he *didn't* want gifts. What he did want? Was to show this family just how much they meant to him, even if

one day they'd be completely gone from his life.

It was hard looking for gifts, especially in a busy Walmart the day before Christmas. Keith had thankfully managed to find a few things; all with Sophia's help of course. There'd been a new plastic train set for Mateo, one Keith had seen the boy admiring in a Christmas advertisement. Josie was to receive a sketchbook paired with professional prismacolor colored pencils. Sophia had urged Keith to draw a picture on the front page (it was going to be terrible, though Keith was sure Josie would appreciate the sentiment.) Benji had been hard to shop for, but in the end Keith decided on a white shirt with a terrible logo on the front. Keith knew for sure the teenager would find it humorous.

Rosa though, Rosa's gift was the hardest. Keith had been at a standstill, staring blankly at the Walmart aisles with absolutely nothing in mind. What did one get Rosa Sanchez? She was the most amazing woman Keith knew; he wasn't sure any gift could ever come close to being worthy. Rosa deserved everything - and what did Keith have? A couple twenty dollar bills lingering between the seams of his wallet.

It wasn't until Sophia and Lance walked aimlessly through the Walmart book section that Keith found it. He'd just found a large book on constellations for Cleo, and just as he set the shiny hardback into the cart, he *saw it*.

It was small, a simple paperback novel with a yellow cover. There was a thirty percent off sticker glued to its left corner, covering half of the title. Except, Keith didn't need to know the title - he would know that book anywhere.

The novel was Keith's favorite book of all time: *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd. It had been Keith's best friend; a piece of American literature he'd been forced to read in middle school. At first Keith hadn't thought anything of it- up until he was two chapters in. After that he was hooked, something that turned into more than just a school assignment. It became his everything, his companion. When he was sad or lonely (a feeling that was never foreign) he'd read it, stroking the pages like a child clinging to their mother. It brought him comfort during times when no one else could. He'd kept the school copy, never daring to part with it. The book had become tattered with use, filled with notes and tear stains that Keith would be proud to call his own.

He lost it in a move between foster houses. He'd cried for hours.

The novel wasn't something your typical thirteen year old boy might enjoy. It was a simple book; the story of a young, motherless girl who'd ran away, all to find herself falling into the arms of three single women in South Carolina. It was through this story that the main character, Lily, learned about motherhood - the effects it can have, the importance it carries, the strength that women hold. These were lessons Keith would've never learned on his own, and it was through these lessons that Keith felt it - he felt loved.

Keith didn't believe in God. But if that book was the bible? Hell, he just might.

"This," Keith whispered, gripping onto the book with shaking hands.
"This is what I'm getting for Rosa."

Sophia raised an eyebrow, observing the book's cover in question.
"Are you sure?"

Keith nodded, his jaw set. "I'm positive."

It wasn't that he *thought* the book was a good idea. No, Keith *knew* the book was a good idea. Rosa was the first woman that had come into Keith's life and done more than just feed him. She'd made an impact, she'd made him feel loved. Rosa triggered a feeling in Keith that warmed the bottom of his belly and soared to the tips of his hair. It was a feeling that made Keith feel so entirely valid, like he was wanted, and that there were parts of him to be valued.

There was only one other thing that ever made Keith feel that way - and it was that book, the one sitting on the Walmart shelf with the thirty percent off sticker.

Day 9

Christmas Eve Day

2:52 P.M.

A mixtape.

Keith made Lance a bloody mixtape - in CD form no less. So more like a playlist, but whatever.

It was terrible; ten songs compiled, arranged, and burned onto a CD in less than one hour. After his escape to Walmart Keith had snuck back up the stairs and snatched his laptop, all to hide beneath the

dresses of Cleo's bedroom closet. He typed away at that thing; downloading, researching, softly banging his head against the closet wall - all to finish with a crappy excuse for a gift.

Sophia assured him Lance would love it, but Keith was still unsure.

"You should give it to him tonight," Cleo offered when Keith emerged from the closet. She sat on the edge of her bed with a brush running through her hair, the dark locks falling down past her shoulder blades.

"I'm debating not giving it at all," Keith cried desperately, laying his now closed laptop on the bed. "I had the hardest time finding songs. And it's such? A meme?"

Cleo ignored that last part. "Which ones did you use?"

Keith tossed her the tape and sighed, falling to the floor and resting his head against the bed. Cleo read over the songs, all sprawled in messy handwriting straight onto the CD. He'd used a sharpie and hoped for the best.

"These are-

"Stupid?" Keith muttered, feeling defeated. "I know."

Cleo rolled her eyes and handed him the CD back. "I was gonna say perfect, you dipshit."

Keith turned to her with wide eyes and eyebrows raised. "What? Fifty percent of the songs on there aren't even from this century."

"That may be true, but you like those songs. And the other fifty percent? Those are songs Lance is into. It's a perfect combo, so drop it. Okay?"

He didn't really believe her. "But-"

Cleo raised her eyebrows. "Drop. It."

Keith groaned, though he did as he was told and finished the subject. Instead he held the CD in his hands, twirling it between his fingers.

"Do you think he'll like it?"

"Of course he'll like it, Keith. Don't doubt yourself."

"No I mean-" Keith stood up from the floor so he could face her, his expression evidently worried. "What if I cross a line with this? We aren't actually dating, you know that."

"So?"

"So what I'm saying is just that. We aren't dating. Friends don't give each other mixtapes - especially with songs like these."

Cleo was quiet, observing Keith with her blue eyes - ones not weren't far different from the ones on Lance's face. "Then maybe this is the perfect opportunity to tell him how you feel."

Keith gaped. "Tonight?"

She nodded. "Dinner starts around six. You can steal Lance away sometime before then."

Keith wanted to argue against that - he really did. Cleo never gave him much time to respond though, instead escaping from the bedroom and off to finish helping her family make dinner. He was left silent, all to stand alone with his hand clasped around a plastic CD case.

Was he going to do it? Possibly. The thought crossed Keith's mind, only to turn around and cross back all over again.

He *wanted* to tell Lance, that was something Keith couldn't lie about. At the pit of Keith's stomach, he knew that telling Lance had more than a thousand ways to go wrong. Cleo was right though - he wasn't going to have another option like this.

Swallowing down his pride, Keith made a decision. He took one last look at the CD mixtape in his hand, rubbing his thumb along the edges of the plastic.

Yes. He was going to tell Lance, and he going to do more than just reveal his feelings. He was going to tell Lance *everything*.

Day 9

Christmas Eve Day

3:10 P.M.

Keith found Lance behind a kitchen counter, his arms covered in white flour all the way to his elbows. The boy looked distraught, white flour decorating the skin between his nose and cheek.

Lance looked up from the mess he'd made only to flash Keith a toothy grin, finally noticing the bashful boy. "There you are! I was wondering where'd you'd gone. Here, you can help me make the—"

"Actually," Keith stammered, holding tightly to the plastic CD case. He'd taken so long to wrap the damn thing, and yet it still looked ridiculous. He held it behind his back, hoping Lance wouldn't notice. "I was wondering if you could take a quick break?"

"Why? Is something wrong?"

Keith shook his head quickly, making his dark bangs shift. He moved a hand to tuck them behind his ear, already feeling the warmth in his cheeks. "No, I just wanted to talk to you and—"

Both boys never noticed Rosa re-enter the kitchen, a flour covered apron wrapped around her round body.

"Keith! I haven't seen you all day!"

"Sorry," Keith mumbled, lowered his head bashfully. "I was out buying last minute Christmas gifts."

Both Rosa and Lance's eyes brightened at that, their expressions almost identical. "Oh Keith," Rosa began, wiping her hands on a rag. "You didn't have to buy anything for anyone." The woman was so warm, reaching out to grab Keith's fingers in a motherly display of affection. In a swift attempt to hide the mixtape, Keith stuffed the plastic case into the back seam of his jeans.

"Yeah, Keith," Lance began, his eyes wide in a rare look Keith didn't recognise. "You didn't have to do that."

But he did. Besides the plastic case and pack of CDs for Lance's mixtape, Keith's other gifts were more than just important, more than just presents for a simple family he'd visited on break - they were for a family that Keith *loved*.

Keith couldn't believe it either. Love? Him? That had never happened before.

A humble grin lit up Keith's skin. "It's alright," He confirmed,

holding tightly to Rosa's hands. "I don't mind buying a few presents. I *wanted* to buy them."

"If you say so," Rosa tutted, giving Keith's palm one more squeeze before letting go. She turned back to the kitchen and softly pushed Lance out of the way, digging her hands into the flour and dough.

"Ma!" Lance cried, frowning as she took his place. "I was doing that!"

She gave her son a firm look, lips pulled into a tight line. "Lance, this is my way of kicking you from the kitchen. Go hang out with Keith- he looks lonely."

"But-

"I've got it! It's okay, dinner is almost finished anyway. Go have fun." She smiled, giving her son a soft, flour covered pat to the cheek. Lance squirmed like a child, wiping at the flour handprint in annoyance.

Once Lance had washed the flour from his arms as best he could, the two boys retreated from the kitchen. As they moved down the hallway, Keith couldn't help but overhear voices behind the closed door of the guest room (or, as Keith now knew it, Sophia's old room.)

"...I am *not* comfortable with that boy in this house!"

"Mother, listen. Keith is a welcomed guest in our home, and Rosa and I asked you rather politely to tolerate anything and everything you didn't like."

The next words were cold, harsh. "Yes, I know Jaime, and for your sake I'm being polite. But my patience is running thin! If you would let me just..."

Keith couldn't hear the rest, purposefully maneuvering out of the hallway and towards the backdoor. He didn't want to hear what Lance's Abuela had to say, nor did he want a repeat of their experience at the Sanchez store.

It was a clear day, though soft wind trailed across the back field, promising a future windstorm. Lance plopped down in the tall grass, stretching his legs out against the coarse weeds.

"So," He began, resting on his elbows. "What did you want to talk about?"

Keith bit his lip, sitting up straight with his legs crossed beneath him. Not daring to think twice, Keith reached into the back of his jeans. His hand reemerged with the mixtape in hand, a thick letter taped to the back.

"I have your christmas present."

This seemed to catch Lance's attention, removing his gaze from the rolling fields and over to the wrapped mixtape.

Keith expected him to say something; to snort or to smile or to *something*. Instead he swallowed, the movement obvious with sweat rolling down his throat.

"Christmas is tomorrow," He muttered, sitting up straighter. "Why now?"

"I guess," Keith began, worry clouding his vision. "I guess I wanted to give it without prying eyes?"

Lance chuckled, the obvious apprehension he'd worn just seconds earlier now gone. "You say that like you're uncertain."

Keith bit his lip. "Well, I sort of am."

Lance finally reached for the present. He held it in his hand to inspect the paper, turning it over in his palm. "You shouldn't be," Lance assured him, finally moving his fingers to tear at the attached letter seal.

"Wait—" Keith started, voice sharp. "Don't, er, don't read the letter in front of me."

Lance raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

Keith hugged a knee to his chest, letting the pressure against his heart calm its excessive beating. He refused to say a word, trepidation feasting on any breath he could've used to speak.

"Why?" Lance repeated his question, the second time was far more sensitive.

Keith heaved a breath. "It's embarrassing," He muttered, the words

squeezed from his chest.

"It can't be that bad-

He stopped, sentence halting midway. Lance must've recognised the look on Keith's face for what it truly was; fear. The letter was more than just a revelation of how Keith felt. The words inside were an explanation; his thoughts, his ideas. It was a peek into what made Keith, well, Keith. He didn't want to be present for a disclosure like that.

"Okay. I'll read it later." Lance folded the letter and set it to his left in the grass. "Anyway, let's look at the *real* gift." He grinned, ripping off the wrapping paper Keith had spent all of twenty minutes on.

The paper fell away, all to reveal Keith's ridiculous, rather romantic mixtape.

"I know it's really cheesy-" Keith began, words slipping from his mouth one after the other. He spoke so quickly that Lance had a hard time keeping up; Keith's apprehension was too much. "-but I needed a good gift for you. I know you like memes and giving your crush a mixtape is literally such a stale meme thing to do but I don't know, I did it anyway? A lot of the songs are from the seventies and eighties but I included some of your favorites which means there's Beyoncé and Kesha which I know you love-

He was stopped by Lance's hand, a finger pressed against Keith's lips to shush him.

"Wait," Lance began, slowly removing his hand. "Did you just say 'crush'?"

If Keith was a realistic person, he would've thought before responding. But was Keith a realistic person? The answer to that question is subjective, as Keith is a boy in love, and boys in love are *never* realistic.

So yes, Keith did just say 'crush', and yes, he hadn't meant to. However, with the way the boys were looking at each other one might've thought Keith just pleaded murder - not his gay crush revelation.

"I, uh, I-" Keith stuttered, looking at anywhere other than Lance's face. "Yes. I did."

It was silent - the painful kind. The two boys didn't dare speak first; the only noise was the distant sounds of a radio playing in Rosa's kitchen.

"How long?"

Lance's words were out of the blue, completely devoid of surprise or emotion. At least, devoid of the emotion Keith had wanted.

"*How long?!*" Keith asked in disbelief. "Jesus, you find out your fake boyfriend has the hots for you and you ask *how long?*?"

"Well, obviously," Lance began, color still gone from his face. "That's a normal question to ask when someone says they like you."

Keith huffed, turning his head away as to hide the red that filled his cheeks. He was embarrassed and didn't know how to react - that much was obvious. "Fine." He paused. "A while."

"*A while?!*"

"Yes," Keith stated, his voice annoyed. "A while."

"You have to be more specific than that."

"I don't know? From the beginning of this trip, maybe?"

Lance deadpanned, shifting to sit up taller. "That was, what, five days ago?"

Keith paused, gripping tightly to the ends of his sweatshirt. This wasn't what he wanted, this isn't what he'd planned.

"Nine."

Lance blinked.

"What?"

"Nine," Keith repeated, violently praying that their conversation could end. "This trip started nine days ago."

Lance gulped, eyes large, blue, and bug-eyed. "So you've had a crush on me for nine days?"

The sentence was more like a statement than a question, as if Lance needed to say it out loud in order to process it himself. It wasn't

that Lance had outright denied him. There had been no verbal proof of whether or not Lance reciprocated Keith's feelings. However, it felt *implied* that Lance didn't reciprocate. Keith felt denied, as if Lance had excused the declaration, as if Lance didn't know how to react. Lance was hard to read, especially when he knew someone was watching him. That's what Keith had *tried to do* - watch him. Watch for the signs, watch for something in Lance's eyes that could calm his worries. So far nothing was working; if anything, Lance's lack of opinion only made Keith's concerns turn sour.

"Yeah," Keith answered, looking away. The two boys didn't dare make eye contact. Both were too awkward to look each other in the eyes, and too prideful to fix it. It was tense, the air between them layered with so many underlying emotions that neither had the decency nor intelligence to recognise it.

Keith tried his hardest to show no emotion. Showing any felt like a weakness.

Lance again spoke first, though it did nothing to ease the tension. "Is nine days even enough time? To, you know, get a crush?"

Keith threw Lance a brutal eye, his lips chapped and dry.

"Should it matter?"

Lance rubbed at his lip again, a sign that he wasn't sure what sort of emotions to feel. "No, I guess not."

Keith dug his fingers into the dry weeds, plucking strands from the dirt and throwing them at nothing. "So," He mumbled, focusing on the bugs that crawled over his knees.

"So," Lance echoed him, looking down at the mixtape. He turned it around over and over, feeling the ridges of the plastic dig into his skin. "You like me."

"That was established."

Keith wanted to throw up. Maybe if he did then the demons would go away, the ones hiding at the pit of his stomach. They liked to churn and gurgle with each passing moment, each one just waiting, hiding. They were Keith's anxiety, the ones that he'd had since birth.

"Keith-" Lance began, finally setting the CD down on the grass

beside him. "I'm sorry, but I can't. I'm sort of scared. Yeah, scared, I guess you could call it that. It's a weird feeling, and I can't explain it. I guess it's just everything I'm dealing with right now. My Dad, my sister, school. It's a lot for me to handle."

Keith nodded, never removing his gaze from the grass. It was holding him down, the dry, dead strands wrapped around Keith's fingers as he tugged them from the earth.

"I understand."

"Are you sure? I don't want you to feel like-"

"I understand."

Lance nodded, his face solemn. Keith was expressionless, and that scared Lance more than anything.

How were they supposed to go on after this?

Lance stood up from the grass, mixtape and letter in hand. He stood for a moment, staring down at Keith's bowed head. He debated reaching out, laying his hand on Keith's shoulder, *something, anything*.

Instead he sucked in a breath and turned around, his back to Keith like a coward. Lance felt hollow, and he didn't doubt Keith felt the same way.

He took a few steps towards the house before Keith muttered something quietly, his voice just at the brink of a whisper. It made Lance's heart break a little, but the feeling was something he tried to ignore.

"You can throw away the letter."

Lance bit his lip, hard enough that he hoped it drew blood.

Once inside Lance did as he'd been told, tossing the letter into a trashcan by the fridge halfheartedly. He didn't discard the mixtape though, instead holding it tightly until he feared it might crack.

Rosa looked up from her dinner preparations when Lance entered the kitchen. Her cheeks were rosy, up until the point she saw Lance's expression.

"You alright, mijo? You look like you've seen a ghost."

As always, Lance put up his fake smile. Rosa didn't believe it for a second, and still, neither did he.

"I'm fine Mamá. Just a little tired is all."

Day 9

Christmas Eve Day

6:09 P.M.

(Warning: Triggering Homophobia)

Dinner was supposed to be perfect.

When Keith first imagined Christmas dinner, what he visualized was something chaotic, something delightful, an event that everyone could enjoy. It held to his expectations, it was beautiful and vibrant, smells of different foods flooding everyone's senses and rumbling their tummies.

The Sanchez dining table had been extended to fit five more people. Smaller tables had been set up in the living room for the younger children, each one lined with a colorful tablecloth. Food decorated the dining table's wood surface; all adorned with red flowers and colorful tableware to go around. Jaime had set up the kitchen's corner radio to play christmas songs at low volume, and just the soft hum of music was enough to keep a steady, amiable mood throughout the house. The christmas dinner display had set the night up to be full of laughter and giggles - everything it was supposed to be.

It definitely started out that way. But did it end that way?

That was the question.

Not only were Lance and Keith dealing with their problems, but it seemed Abuela and Jaime were as well. Keith had noticed them bickering again in another room before dinner, the same conversation still plaguing their relationship. Everyone could see the tension between mother and son, even if It had, strangely enough, completely disappeared when dinner began. Keith wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

"Keith, tell me about your trip here!"

The boy was distracted, eyes staring down at his fork. It lingered across his food, leaving the homemade tamale alone on the plate.

"Keith," Danny said, nudging his arm and pointing over to Aunt Cassie.

"Oh?" Keith looked up from his plate, it obvious his head was in other places. "Sorry. What was the question?"

"Your trip. I hear you came down with Lance from Oregon?"

Keith nodded. Despite only having a few of the table guest's eyes on him, Keith felt rather put on the spot.

"Yeah. We met there."

"How'd you meet?"

Keith inwardly groaned, having already gone through the same conversation just a few nights prior. Thankfully Lance answered for him, describing in great detail their roommate situation. He was rather serious, Keith noted. It was something he wasn't used to - seeing Lance Sanchez devoid of his usual wicked look.

As Lance rambled on Keith let his mind wander, again toying with his dinner. He trailed his fork over the piles of food that decorated his plate, never eating anything despite the grumble of his stomach.

Lance. It was Lance on his mind. He'd denied Keith, claimed it was over the stress of family. It wasn't personal, the rejection was

"So, Keith," a voice said, awakening him from his thoughts. "Why'd you agree to come down and join our lovely family?"

Keith looked up sharply, almost dropping his fork to the table, and he instantly felt uneasy.

It was Abuela.

Her voice was evenly pitched and loud. He didn't like it, and having such a tight, pompous woman speak to him with her nose in the air was proving to be intolerable. She'd never once spoken to Keith of her own accord before. They'd never had a real conversation, never once had she attempted to ask questions.

What made now any different?

"Excuse me?" He mumbled, setting down his fork.

She repeated her question bluntly, a second time far more impatient. "Why'd you come here?"

"Lance invited me," Keith fumbled, feeling sheepish under her gaze. "We'd been dating for a while - we only felt it was right that I meet the family."

She smiled. It was sweet - if you considered a tightly pulled, obviously forced smile on a seventy year old woman to be 'sweet'.

"I thought it was because you had nowhere else to go to for christmas?"

Keith's eyes widened in surprise.

What was Abuela playing at? Why was she asking these questions? She was more forward than he'd anticipated. Rosa and Jaime told her he was an orphan, he'd assumed that much. But touching on the orphan subject? That was one thing, but doing so publicly? And at the dinner table no less? That was a low call, especially for a woman as respectable as Lance's Abuela. Keith wasn't sure what she was doing, but so far it didn't appear anywhere near good.

He took a bite of food, mostly so he'd have time to think. Once the burning tamale slipped down his throat he spoke.

"You're right." Keith set down his fork casually. "I'm a foster kid. Lance offered to let me stay for Christmas. It's been a nice change for sure."

There was a pause between the two of them. Keith kept his face calm and contained, but Lance he wasn't so sure could do the same- the boy was holding his breath.

"We've loved having Keith here," Rosa interrupted, racing to fill the gap. "He's been a wonderful addition to the household."

Abuela never missed a beat.

"Wonderful for the household? Or wonderful for Lance?" She took a small bite of tamale, the look on her face oozing with something Keith couldn't quite place. Sarcasm? Anger? Passive Aggression? All

three?

"I'd say Keith has been more than wonderful for *everyone* ." Rosa smiled, and it was forced, feigned, all terribly so. Keith couldn't name a single time ever seeing Rosa look so fake. Keith knew that Rosa didn't like her mother-in-law, and it was obvious even now that she didn't approve of Abuela's prying questions.

"I'm not sure about *everyone* ." Abuela's words were devilish- how she could speak so calmly and appear so terrifying was beyond Keith.

Then, as if he thought his words could come to the rescue, Jaime spoke. He didn't even look up from his food.

"Mother? Would you please just keep your observations to yourself? We are trying to have a peaceful dinner."

Keith chewed lightly, eyes shifting between Abuela and her son.

What was he missing?

"My observations are important, Jaime. You can't ignore them."

Something was going on - was it the fight Jaime and Abuela had been disagreeing over just a half hour earlier? Keith didn't know much context of their disagreement, though one thing could be certain; Keith was a source of that dissent. How much of a role he played was unsure, but he had his hunches.

One thing Keith seemed to gather was that Abuela was against Keith being in the home. The first night he'd met her, Abuela had been composed and kind - in her own strange, barely tolerable way. However, the more time went on, the more Keith discovered that Abuela was only using that as a cover. She was disappointed in Keith's presence- and when Abuela didn't agree with something? Then it was *automatically deemed wrong*.

A second thing Keith gathered was that Jaime - though still stressed and confused - was trying beyond a doubt to stand at Lance's side. Even if Lance himself didn't recognise it.

"Mother," Jaime repeated. Laying down a fork. "Please stop."

It was then that a switch had flipped.

One moment everyone was sitting quietly - Benji scarfing down food, the cousins conversing with Cleo at the corner of the table - and the next moment? Abuela was slamming her palm against the table.

"I have had *enough*. I have tried, Jaime, I have tried to be polite. I have done as you asked. I was nice to Keith. I tolerated Lance's *lifestyle choice*, but enough is enough."

Other dinner members turned their heads towards the noise, even the children stopped playing, each person no longer distracted with their own conversations. All eyes were on Abuela, and Keith could feel something coming that he knew deep inside would never end well.

"Stop this," Jaime forced out. "Now."

"Stop?" Abuela scowled. "I will not."

"This," Jaime began, motioning around the table. "I won't have it, this passive aggressive, snide way of fixing the things you don't like."

"I am doing nothing wrong! I am merely trying my hardest to do what's right."

"Mother, can we move this into the other room?" The words were pushed through grit teeth, his tone something Keith was sure he only used in the most dire of circumstances. Keith could only wonder if he used the same tone with his own children.

Abuela closed her fingers together on the table, pushing her plate away politely.

"Whatever you have to say can be said in front of my other children." She motioned to Aunt Cassie and Uncle Miguel, both of whom sheepishly looked away.

"What about the others?" Jaime exclaimed, turning and pointing to the rest of the audience; Diego and Aria, two cousins who sat at the end of the table with wide eyes and closed mouths, the children in the conjoined room, the rest of Jaime's children. Danny looked beyond uncomfortable, and Rachel obviously wasn't sure what to think. Sophia just looked in pain.

"They don't deserve this," He continued. "It is Noche Buena - I will

not have it ruined with your disrespectful grudge towards my son and his—" Jaime paused, voice wavering, and Keith wondered if he'd even say it. He'd never said it before, never openly acknowledged it. He'd dug himself into a hole, there was no way out now.

"-Boyfriend. His boyfriend."

Keith only celebrated for a second, because then it all came crashing down.

Abuela had started it all. She'd been angry from the very beginning, her fury lingering from the fight between mother and son. Now she was getting it out, letting off steam, unloading the pressure - all by torturing Keith. Keith was her target. And Jaime? Jaime was just as angry as his mother was, but now he was trying to redeem himself. He'd made a mistake in the grocery store all those days ago, and this was his attempt at fixing it.

It wasn't working.

"Why are you defending me?"

Lance had spoken.

Keith looked at Lance for the first time since the meal had started. His face was red, eyebrows furrowed and lips pulled into a tight line. His emotions were hard to read - and it wasn't because he lacked any, no, it was because there was *too much*.

"Why are you defending me," Lance repeated, louder this time. His voice boomed across the dining room and into the kitchen like an echo. "You obviously didn't want to before."

"Lance," Rosa warned. "Don't add to this. Your father made his apology for the things he'd said."

"Okay, yes. But it's obvious he's still struggling! What is so bad about me being bisexual?!"

Jaime swallowed, "I don't want to talk about that right now, okay? This is Christmas dinner, Lance. If you'd just—"

Abuela interrupted immediately. "Jaime, don't be ridiculous. I know you're struggling just as much as I am. Don't lie to your son, he doesn't deserve it."

And then Lance was turning his gaze on Abuela, voice verbally on the edge of cracking. "I don't deserve it? Of course I don't! I don't deserve you or my father to be so against-"

"Lance-" Sophia began, reaching her hand out towards her brother. She'd made the mistake of joining the conversation. "Maybe you should-

"Oh shut up , Sophia. You're just as bad, so stay out of it."

There was a dramatic gasp from Abuela's side of the table, but it was too late.

"How dare you speak to Sophia that way!"

Lance was in dismay. "How dare I?" He countered this towards his grandmother, the words practically spat from his lips. His voice had gotten louder, just as Abuela's had. "How dare you. You've bullied Keith, disrespected me, and now you defend her? *The grandchild who ran away?*"

Abuela was infuriated. "I forbid you from treating her that way. Sophia has gone through terrible things and doesn't deserve her own brother, her own family, to treat her so disrespectfully."

"You forbid me?" Lance scoffed, suddenly standing up from the table. "I am just as important as Sophia! I've gone through just as much crap! I may like men, but that doesn't make me a mistake. It's a part of who I am!"

"Lance, maybe you shouldn't-"

"NO! I'm tired, tired of all this bullshit! Sophia abandoned me - if you, I don't know, forgot that specific detail. She abandoned all of us! She was gone for everything ; Benji's chemo, me coming out, Cleo's science fairs, Josie's growing up - and for what? To come back home and automatically be accepted by Abuela? Ever since I came out all I've been is a disappointment!"

It was then that Abuela slapped her palm against the wood of the table. It made Keith jump in his seat, forcing all eyes on the tall, thin woman.

" You will close your mouth boy."

Keith wasn't sure what he'd expected. It had been a recipe for

disaster, and the family had more than enough ingredients.

Keith sat still, his body nearly frozen to the core.

Everything ached. This family was falling apart, this family that he loved, and he couldn't seem to remember who's fault it was anymore. It was like a hammer had been brought to the face of a stone sculpture - pieces all flying.

Stop. Please. Stop.

The words repeated themselves in Keith's head, a broken record player he didn't know how to fix. He wanted so badly to say them, to say the words. He couldn't - his mouth was shut tight, string sewn through the skin.

Lance folded his arms. "Let's just get it all out there, yeah? Cards on the table."

"Alright then," Said Abuela. "Tell me how my grandson really feels."

"How really feel?" Lance bellowed this, his voice shaking. "I hate Sophia, and right now? I hate you!" Lance jabbed a finger in Abuela's direction. "I hate that Sophia is your favorite, and I hate that my romantic attraction has become an issue for you. It's not your life, Abuela!"

Cleo's voice shook, suddenly intruding in a place she shouldn't be. "Lance, please just stop -"

"Don't even get into this, Cleo." It was Danny who muttered the words, his voice suddenly a part of all the bickering.

"I know," Cleo cried, her eyes shifting between Lance and Daniel. "But I just think that maybe if Lance had left Sophia, Dad and Abuela alone then-"

"Wait, now you're defending Sophia too?" Daniel just didn't know when to stop, and obviously? Neither did his family.

"And you aren't?" Cleo stared at her brother, shock engulfing her face. "I thought you were better than this, Daniel."

Stop it. Stop it.

Daniel set his jaw. "Okay, but maybe Lance is right on this? Lance is

right. He shouldn't be treated differently for his sexuality."

"Daniel," Rachel pleaded, hiking Isabella up on her lap. "Maybe you shouldn't interfere."

"Rachel, I know you want what's best, but right now I just want-

Cleo's voice was like nails on a chalkboard. "*I'm just trying to make peace!* And I'm not saying Lance shouldn't be treated differently, no! I'm just angry that you're defending his unnecessary anger!"

"I'm not really defending him, just defending the fact that he shouldn't be treated this way!"

Stop.

Cleo threw herself from the table, almost tipping her chair over in the process. "I'm not saying that Lance should be treated badly! I love Lance, you know that. I've always supported him and I've *always* agreed with who he was. But what I'm saying is that Lance is making this a bigger problem than it should be! "

"*But he's right!*" Daniel too had stood from the table, almost shaking his chair to the floor. "Abuela is playing favorites - she favors Sophia over him. I forgave Sophia, but it's still wrong! Of Abuela!

"Stop this," Sophia cried, tears pouring down her cheeks. "I don't want to be a part of this. I don't want you all fighting over whether or not Lance and I are more favored! We are both just as important."

Please stop this.

Lance growled, the noise rumbling in his throat. "Oh, back off. You're just part of the problem."

"Please," Rosa begged, tears staining the bottom of her eyelids. "Can we just finish this? These issues are real and valid, but they don't need to be said when you all are so angry. Can't we talk about this like rational people - when the emotion has died down?"

Stop.

"No," Lance spat. "I want to know what Cleo *really* has to say."

"What I have to say?" Cleo scoffed. "You don't care about that,

you're just angry."

"Of course I'm angry! You're defending Sophia and Abuela!"

Stop.

"Yes, Sophia, but not Abuela! Sophia made a mistake, but have you ever gotten it through your thick ass head that *maybe* she's better than that? There's more to her than this 'evil sister' character you've envisioned her as! She's worked so hard to get where she is today and yet you just-"

Noise.

"Cleo, I swear to god-"

So much noise.

These were people Keith cared about. Watching them throw insults left and right was an experience Keith wasn't accustomed to, and it showed no sign of stopping. A part of Keith knew that Cleo was right. Her side of the argument was triggered by her natural urge to fix things; she was the peacemaker. She had too much of Rosa in her, too much of that genuine care, too much of that urge to be the arbitrator. Cleo had once said it herself, said that Rosa's need to make people happy got in the way of the big picture.

Then, Daniel? The eldest son had chosen sides - which was *never* a good thing.

Hadn't their car ride done anything? What happened to the songs they sang, the games they played in the tree forest? What happened to feeling like everything could be okay? Why had the grudge suddenly reemerged?

"LANCE."

Keith spoke, and his tongue felt like fire. It burned, searing the edges of his vocal cords.

Lance didn't turn at the sound of his name, and Keith gripped the boy's hand in an attempt to reach him. Lance was in too deep, but he hadn't heard. Lance was too far gone, he was too angry, too furious.

"LANCE, STOP!"

Keith never remembered standing up, nor did he remember ever shouting. It had somehow grabbed everyone else's attention - Cleo stopped intruding, Daniel stopped defending. Lance's hand was hot in Keith's palm, covered in sweat and violently shaking.

"Lance, you need to calm down; I need you to rethink. You need to sort through what's going on. You're shaking."

In hindsight, Keith should've walked away. He should've let the family deal with their own problems. He should've never interfered. Except, deep beneath all those vicious words and the sharp language? Keith was a part of the problem.

"Keith, get out. You're not a part of this. This isn't your family, so can you just back off."

"Lance-" Keith tried again, lip quivering. He tried to ignore the malice in Lance's voice.

"This isn't your vacation, this isn't your fight to be a part of."

Keith held even tighter to Lance's hand, squeezing it so tightly he thought it might crack. People were staring, they'd turned, their eyes on the two boys as if glued.

"Lance, please-"

Lance wrenched his hand from Keith's grasp. "Will you STOP? You're not even my boyfriend! So *stop acting like one.* "

Silence.

The words. They weren't a secret anymore. The truth? It was out.

The two boys had planned from the very beginning to never tell. They'd made a promise, a pact, one that sealed a deal. This deal? No one was to know their true relationship. The boys weren't lovers. And, with the way Lance was acting? Keith was positive they never could be.

You're not even my boyfriend, so stop acting like one.

Everyone was silent, pins could drop, dust could be heard as it fell. The only sound was the radio - a factor everyone had forgotten about. Jingle bells played at low volume, and Keith decided he could never listen to that song the same way again.

It hurt, and Keith could feel tears begin to fall. It hurt that Lance had broken their promise. Now Keith was the liar, the fake. What would the family think of him now?

"I don't need you holding my hand." Lance spoke on.

They were all staring. Everyone was there, everyone was watching. Eyes big and small, belonging to old and the young - all were on them.

"I don't have feelings for you-

Keith didn't want them looking, he wanted them gone, away before Lance said something he'd regret.

"I don't need you babying me-

Not that he'd already done that. He ruined everything. Everything.

"And I don't care about you, Keith."

Images of a boy Keith once knew clouded his vision. He was so happy, smiling, laughing. Then? The images were replaced. Replaced with a new boy, a taller boy, a man so similar, but so different. But that smile, it was that smile, the same one. Why did they have the same face? Crooked grin, tilted up to heaven on one side and down to hell on the other.

Who was he?

Where had he gone?

Day 10

Sunday, December 25th

Christmas Day

12:00 A.M.

Group Chat: Lance is kinkier than Shiro

Members: Firelord, choke Me Daddy, President Taquito, Pidgeon, Hunky Munky, princess fukboi killer

12:00 A.M.

Hunk Munky (Hunk Maika'i) Said:

Merry christmas ya filthy animals!

I hope you all had a good christmas Eve!

Merry Christmas!

Day 9

Saturday, December 24th

Christmas Eve Day

7:01 P.M.

Keith left.

He hadn't bothered to grab his suitcase, or his wallet, or his shoes by the door. He simply snatched a set of random keys from the hook and bolted.

The table had been still; watching him. It was Benji who moved first.

"I hate all of you," He'd threatened, all before pushing himself from the table, making his chair clatter to the floor. "You managed to fuck up Christmas."

Benji raced after Keith - he was the only one who did. Everyone else was immovable with shock, simply staring as Keith slammed the front door behind him. It was windy outside. Violently so, the weather promising enough strength to battle human bodies and throw down grandfather trees.

"Keith!" Benji cried, sprinting with skinny legs and socked feet across the front lawn. "Keith, stop!"

The boy hadn't heard him, instead finding the vehicle match to his stolen car keys and hopping in. It was Daniel and Rachel's minivan - there was a stick figure family plastered to the trunk window. Tears overflowed down Keith's cheeks; he continued to let them fall. He was unsure of the plan - was there even a plan in the first place? All Keith knew was that he needed to get away, that running and hiding was the only option. How far he'd drive and how far he'd flee was uncertain - maybe it relied on the level of gas in Daniel's tank.

No matter what the circumstances, there was only one thing Keith was positive about.

He was never going back.

Day 9

7:03 P.M.

Rosa had never been one to be infuriated. Disappointed, yes. A little bit angry? Of course. She could become irritated just like any other mother. This simple fact made her quite terrifying in the Sanchez home; all the children knew what she was capable of.

The 2016 Christmas Eve night was to - from this point on - be further known as legendary. It wasn't for the fight that broke out or the dramatics that occurred, no. It was because Rosa Sanchez - a woman always known to be careful with the way she treated others - had done the unthinkable.

She'd been the first to move after Benji. She'd stood up from the table and turned to Abuela, the wrinkle line of her face pulled tight with anger.

"You may leave."

Abuela had been appalled; Rosa rebelling had never been a part of her agenda.

"Excuse me?"

"You may leave - as in leave my home."

Abuela blinked once, then twice, all before letting her mouth drop open. "You can't ask that of me!"

"I can," Rosa began, moving out from her chair. "And I will. I'll be paying for your flight home. You will be invited back only on the terms that you can treat my son with respect."

"But, I am your family!"

"Family may be family, but that doesn't excuse you from being a bitch."

Abuela's mouth dropped at that - everyone's did. Even Jaime, who

rather agreed with Rosa's choice to kick Abuela from the home, moved in surprise.

"E-Excuse me?"

Abuela didn't look hurt or sensitive over Rosa's choice of words; no, she looked angry. Annoyed. Infuriated.

Rosa though, Rosa was even more so.

"Yes. I will not tolerate my child, or my child's-" She stopped having remembered the revelation of just moments earlier. For that second of silence Rosa seemed to finally register that Keith *wasn't* her son's boyfriend, and that he *hadn't* been telling the truth.

This confused Rosa, as it also confused Cleo when she first discovered days earlier. Keith and Lance had looked so in love, so completely devoted to each other. This had done more than make the lie believable - it made the lie enjoyable. Rosa had reveled seeing her son so happy, especially after all he'd gone through. Rosa wasn't the only one either to think this - Cleo, Daniel, Rachel, even Jaime. They could all agree with her.

It broke Rosa's heart, now finally able to separate the lie from the fact.

"Or my child's friend," Rosa finally stated, describing the obvious. "So you will leave. I'm sorry that your Christmas was ruined, but I find that to be something you did to yourself."

Abuela wanted to talk back - she really did. She continued to open and close her mouth, each time ready to say something, only to rethink it all over again. Finally, she slammed her fists against the table, all before moving from her seat and towards her cane. "Fine! I will not dawdle any longer." She paused, turning to give her son one final glare. "I hope you're happy Jaime. I hope you're *proud* ."

And with that she was gone, retreated to her guest room to pack up her things, leaving the family to sit still in the dining room.

"We're going after Keith," Rosa stated after moments of quiet, moving to retrieve her dinner plate. "But first - you will all clean up dinner. You will forgive each other, you will drop the grudges. And Lance?" She turned, any sign of motherly love now gone. It was replaced with something Lance never enjoyed: the distress of a mother disappointed.

"You will fix this *thing* you have with Sophia. Now."

Day 9

7:11 P.M.

Against Lance's pleas, Rosa ended up pushing both Sophia and Lance into her bedroom, claiming that their already instigated punishment would triple if either left the bedroom unhappy. She was determined to have them fix this grudge Lance held, and she wanted it happening *now*.

Once the door to the bedroom shut behind his mother, Lance immediately felt alone. He was sheepish, staring at the floor like a scolded child.

"I don't want to do this anymore than you do," Sophia whispered, gripping her hands tightly at her sides in fists. "But we're gonna have to do it. Sooner or later."

"I won't."

Sophia groaned, moving to sit on their parent's bed. "Well you have to. I know you hate me, so you can skip the dramatics."

It was pointless. Lance was still so angry, holding onto his grudge tight enough that he'd rather break an arm than let it go.

"I just," He began, still admiring the wooden floor underneath his socks. "I just hurt. It's a lot, all of it."

"I know."

"How *do* you though?"

Sophia sighed. "You're really going to ask that? I left my family. I made mistakes. You act as if didn't ever regret them, as if they never made me hurt too. They did."

Lance looked up from the floor, observing his older sister's face. It was wet, red and puffy, all from dinner. He'd never noticed.

"Then why did you take so long to come back?"

Sophia swallowed. "I'll tell you why. But you have to promise to listen."

Lance rubbed at his bottom lip, letting his nails dig into the fabric of his jeans.

He wanted to know, just as badly as any other family member might've. He wanted an explanation - he deserved one. Lance could bury his pride for just one moment, all to sit on that bed next to Sophia. He could just ignore that nagging voice in his head, he could pretend his grudge wasn't there. For a moment, just one single moment, he could try.

He took his place at the edge of the bed and sat a foot away, twirling the edge of his shirt in between his thumbs.

"Alright," He whispered, nodding his head. "I'll listen."

Sophia sucked in a breath, turning to look at her little brother. She was a face of remorse, regret, sorrow; the emotions poked at Lance's heart a little.

And then she began, revealing to her brother the same things she had practiced in front of Keith just that morning. Her words were sincere, her tale was profound, and even though she was nervous beyond reason, Lance could tell she knew what to say.

"I made mistakes," She whispered. "You know them, I know them. I'm not denying them, Lance. I thought about each one while I was gone - they almost tore me apart. But," She paused, contemplating if she should say it. "I don't want to talk about them, I've dwelled on these mistakes. Instead I want to talk about how I affected *you*. You didn't deserve to lose me, Lance. And for that I am eternally sorry."

Lance bit his lip even harder, trying his hardest to not respond. He wasn't sure if he should deny or accept the apology - so he let her continue.

"I wasn't ready to come back. I couldn't, and it wasn't because I was a coward. It was because if I did come back? Things wouldn't have ended well. I would fallen into an inescapable pit. Being out there, on my own, away from the safety of Mom and Dad? It saved me. I was forced to survive, and through that I learned how much I depended on our family. I'm not saying that depending on others is wrong - in fact, I encourage it. But there is often a time when you rely on someone too much, and when that happens you no longer learn how to protect yourself. I learned that, Lance. I learned that I am my own person, and that I am the only one in charge of my own destiny."

"That's cheesy as hell," Lance whispered, not realizing he'd actually made the comment out loud. It only made Sophia smile, and she nodded her head.

"It is, but it's true. I'm the only one in charge of my problems, my mistakes, my trials. I learned that I'm the only one who can face them. And then? And then I can move on, let them go. I had to learn this the hard way., but now I've figured it out, and I've grown because of it. I've got a job, I've got an apartment, I've got a car, and I'm getting a college degree."

Lance's eyes widened, and he couldn't help but comment immediately.

"You do?"

She nodded, and it was the grin she wore that said more than a thousand words to Lance.

She was proud of herself for it.

So this is what Abuela had meant. This is what Cleo had meant. This is what they were trying to explain to him; Sophia *was* different than Lance. The two of them had gone through so much, the amount of trial they each had was almost identical. Sophia with her daughter, Lance with Benji - the two of them had been dealt a great many cards to deal with.

The difference between the two, however, was this: Lance was still dealing. He was still rolling in that pain, he was still clutching tightly to it - even if it was time to let go. Sophia *had* let go, she had taken a good look at her mistakes, she'd seen them for what they were, and she'd moved on. Lance had not.

"That's why I'm back now. Alexi may have been ready to see her family, but I wasn't. I had to wait until the perfect time to come back. It wasn't a matter of Alexi, it was a matter of me and *my* emotions."

It wasn't until the tears began to fall that Lance recognised it. All he saw was a grown woman pouring out her heart, making her apology, everything so unfeigned that it only took a few minutes for Lance to make a decision.

He could forgive Sophia.

And this time it *could* be automatic. Forgiveness may be something that's earned, something worked for. Lance felt that with his father - he was still letting himself and his father take their time. Except, maybe that was something he needed to let go too.

Sophia, however, had already done more than enough to warrant that forgiveness. It was time for Lance to agree, it was time for Lance to give in.

"I'm proud of you, though," She said.

Lance looked up, staring at Sophia's quivering lip and shaking eyes. Why? Why was she proud of him? And how? How could she find it in herself to be *proud?* *After all the shit he'd done?*

Lance hadn't noticed the wetness of his eyes until it was too late - the tears had a funny way of appearing at the most inconvenient of times. Except, this wasn't inconvenient. This was the perfect time to cry.

"You came out of the closet." Sophia muttered. "It's a hard thing to do - and I'm more than sorry I wasn't there for it. If I had?" She paused, her voice hesitant. She was scared, but one look at Lance's tears and she knew it would be okay.

"If I'd been there, then maybe I could've come out too. I could've been a support for you. You wouldn't have been alone."

Lance blinked, suddenly letting his mouth open from the sudden surprise.

"You're, you're-"

"A bit gay? Yeah." She smiled, and Lance wanted to smile back.

So he did. It was bright, large, warm - and a complete astonishment. He couldn't help himself; he hugged her. It was sudden and tight, his arms squeezing the girl close to his chest. She squeaked at the sudden change, but she never moved away.

They sat there, crying into each other's shoulders. They were happy tears, mixed with a few sad ones and several ones of regret.

"You? Gay?" Lance chuckled into Sophia's shoulder, already knowing there'd be tear stains left to taint her shirt. He finally let go of her torso, all to smile even wider. "I can't believe it."

Sophia nodded. "Yeah - but listen. I'm not lying when I say it; I *really am proud*. You've done so much, become so much."

"Proud? Even after tonight?"

Sophia's smile shifted away slightly. "No, not really about that. You really did fuck it up, Lance."

Lance frowned, though it was more towards himself.

Of course he fucked it up: Lance ruined Christmas. Abuela may have initiated the destruction, but Lance was the one who'd kept it going. Lance was upset; not at the others, but at himself.

"I don't know how to fix it," Lance whispered in dismay, rather distressed. "Keith is gone, and everyone out that door probably hates me."

"I won't lie to you, the others are probably pissed. Hell, I am too."

"You are?"

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean you've become my sworn enemy. It's just a thing that happens - people get mad. I still love you and you're still my little brother, so I can get over it. And them?" She jabbed her thumb towards the bedroom door, referring to their family off to clean up the mess of Christmas dinner. "They can get over it too."

Lance grappled at this concept, and deep down he knew Sophia was right.

"What should I do?"

"First of all? You need to say sorry to Keith."

Keith.

The mention of his name brought Lance to a whole other issue, an entirely new ballgame.

Lance had revealed their secret, and more than that, he'd pushed Keith away. The two had developed something over the course of the break, and Lance had still found a way to snip that beautiful bond right down the middle.

"I can't," Lance mumbled, feeling at a complete loss. "He hates me now."

"He probably does." Sophia agreed, suddenly reaching for Lance's hands. She held them tightly, squeezing the same way Rosa always did. "I don't know Keith that well, but I'm sure not the only one who's noticed."

"Noticed what?"

"That he's completely fallen for you."

Lance sighed, pulling his hands away softly. "I know."

"Wait - you know?!" Sophia's voice jumped a few octaves, all as she stared at Lance in dismay. "And you *still* said those awful things? What the hell, Lance!"

"I wasn't thinking!"

"Well, *obviously!*" Sophia groaned, rubbing at her temples. She stood up from the bed to pace the room, all before turning back to her brother. "You like him back though, right?"

"I don't know?"

"Oh my god. Oh my god, I can't believe this. Oh. My. God. My brother - he's an idiot!"

Lance scowled, folding his arms over his chest. "I am not an idiot! I've just been too stressed or distracted to think about that sort of thing."

"That boy made you a *mixtape!*" Sophia was near shouting now, though it wasn't loud enough to grab the attention of the other family members beyond the door. "He made you a mixtape, and you, you, you actually-"

"He wrote me a letter too."

"He *what.*"

Lance let out a sigh. "Yes, he wrote me a letter. I didn't read it though - after I told him I didn't want a relationship he sort of-

"Sort of what, Lance Sanchez."

"He told me to throw it away."

Sophia looked ready to crack. Scratch that, she already had, all as she paced the room with hands in her hair. "And so you threw it away. And then proceeded to embarrass him in front of the family."

Lance nodded.

"That's it," Sophia cried, suddenly reaching for Lance's hand. "We are finding that letter. You will rummage through the trash, I don't fucking care. You *will* read the letter, and you *will* say sorry to that poor boy."

Lance didn't dare fight her on this - he was just glad they were fighting in the first place. It was a fight over something normal, something that Lance knew could be fixed. It was a sibling sort of bicker, it was *real*. The two had made up - in a strange, unique sort of way. Now Sophia was helping him like the sister she really was, all as she tugged him by the arm towards the garbage by the fridge.

"Find it," She commanded, pointing at the pile of trash. "Find it, read it, and when you're done? Tell me how you really feel."

7. Chapter 7

Dear Lance,

Let me say that, first of all, I suck at writing letters. This is the fourth time I've written this damn thing. Which you could've guessed, but whatever. And because I suck (majorly) at writing letters, I guess my plan is to get straight to the point.

I love you.

Okay, scratch that, I think I have the capability of loving you.

I don't understand love, like, at all. But this trip? With you? I think I've learned more about love in only nine days than I have in all the stupid, lonely twenty years of life. And if there's one thing I've learned - it's that love is so goddamn fucking contradictory. It makes me so mad.

Like, love is eternal, but also not? And love is earned, but also not? And love can be unconditional, but also not. Love is everything and then nothing, it takes up no space yet my heart feels so full that I worry it'll burst. And when people say heart, they literally mean your heart! Like, its a feeling in your chest, tugging and pulling and grabbing at everything until there's nothing left- but there's always more!

My point is; I don't love you. Not yet. It's more like I love the fact that you're loveable. And I love that one day I could love you, and that it could be endless. I want to spend time with you, I want to bicker with you and fight with you and laugh at your face but then kiss it. Kiss. As in a lot. I want to get to know you, so that this love can become a reality.

I began this relationship looking at you and seeing only a dork. This stupid kid, this weeb, this anime nerd who I had a couple classes with. And somehow, in the course of, like, one day, I realized that I loved you. Or could love you. Would love you. Might love you. It was like seeing the future. I knew deep down that I didn't really love you- not yet anyway. That's the key. Because life is so full of possibilities, that 'soon' or 'possibly' can or cannot become a reality.

Do you wanna know what I see now?

I see a guy who gets all that stuff. He gets it even if he doesn't know he does. And this guy I see, behind all his insecurities and his flaws? He's a human. A human who cries, a human who fucks up, a human who gets

mad and gets sad, a human who makes mistakes.

I know this letter is long, and I know you're laughing at me for being such a cheese. But one last thing. Let me tell you a metaphor I made up.

Life is like dirty laundry.

I thought this up while fantasizing about all the wonderful laundry you'd do for me. See, laundry is part of the circle of life. You are always doing laundry. You'll be doing it when you're three. You'll be doing it when you're thirteen, when you're thirty, you'll be doing it when you're three hundred- if you live that long. The point is, life is going to always, always have laundry. Just like making mistakes. Life is going to always, always include making mistakes. But does that make dirty laundry bad? No. Because you do the laundry, wear it for a week, and then wash it all over again. That's just like life. You make a mistake, you learn from it, and sometimes you make the mistake all over again. And that's okay. Because mistakes are meant to be made. And laundry is meant to get dirty.

So please make mistakes. Please. I'm begging you. If you don't you'd be perfect, and what then? You'd be boring, you'd be a block of cement.

I was gonna originally write you a letter to tell you the story of my past, which is not pretty. At all. I was gonna go in depth, it was gonna be angsty, the works. I decided against it though - I wanted this letter to be happy.

So. I guess I'm done with my letter. I'm really (really) not sure how to end this stupid thing.

So. Will you go on a date with me?

Please?

Yes:

No:

Love,

Keith

8. Chapter 8

Day 10

Sunday, December 25th

Christmas Day

3:01 A.M.

The past seven hours had happened so fast - one moment everyone hated each other, and the next? The next no one even cared. Every grudge had been lifted, every hateful word was at least a tiny bit forgotten. Keith was gone, and everyone seemed to share one single mindset: They needed to find Keith.

The Sanchez family initiated a search party. Despite the children that stayed home with Rachel, everyone chose to come; filling up each car that littered the Sanchez driveway.

Lance had read the letter under the light of his iphone. They played Keith's playlist from the car's CD player as Lance read, and thankfully none of the passengers made any comments.

(Surprisingly enough, even Benji held back.) The car had rumbled beneath his feet, traveling down the main highway as Sophia and Rosa conversed in the front seat over different places to look.

It was in this car that Lance made a decision.

Lance loved Keith; loved him the same way the letter had described. Lance loved that he had the capability to love. He *could* love Keith, and now, with his family problems calmed, he felt the time was right. He could, he would, and he was going to try. He wanted to, the idea suddenly becoming so much more than your average crush. It was a necessity.

Lance wanted to take Keith on dates. He wanted to plant kisses on his nose, he wanted to hold his hand, he wanted to cuddle in bed, he wanted to make fun of his music taste - all to sing his favorite songs as the boy would fall asleep.

It had been staring himself in the face for days, and all this time he'd been too distracted, too worried, too focused on his other problems to realize it. Lance remembered back to only a few days ago. It was the night they'd decorated the christmas tree; Benji had

played his guitar, Keith and the children danced, Lance sat watching with chocolate to devour. He remembered Cleo and the conversation they'd had.

How stupid he'd been - how selfish, how naive, how blind.

They'd been driving for hours - Sophia, Rosa, and Benji all decided to pile into Sophia's sudan and travel along the main highway while others searched the backroads. They'd played Keith's mixtape several times over, each replay for Lance to listen and blush into his winter scarf.

"I'm worried," Rosa repeated for the upteenth time, her hands fumbling with a strange yellow book Lance didn't recognise. "We need a better plan than to just drive aimlessly."

"I'll try calling him again," Lance offered, pulling out his phone. They'd all called several times - even Benji had made the attempt. Their work was going nowhere.

They'd drove for only one more mile before an idea crossed Lance's mind; he'd been scrolling through his messages, only to find a Christmas text from Hunk on the group chat.

Firelord. Choke Me Daddy. President Taquito. Hunky Munky. Princess fukboi killer. Pidgeon.

Pidgeon.

Pidge Holt.

Lance rang his friend six times before the small kid finally answered, their voice lethargic and unconscious on the other line.

"...Hello?"

"Hey, Pidge! It's Lance." The boy could barely control his excitement, fumbling to keep his phone next to his ear.

There was a long pause on the other line, all before Pidge's voice filled the speaker rather loudly.

"Lance, you better have a good reason for waking me up this fucking early on *Christmas morning* -"

Lance didn't miss a beat. "I do, and I'm serious about this. It's a life

or death situation."

Despite Pidge's obvious annoyance and their rather tired responses, the kid knew when Lance meant something. They'd known Lance long enough to recognise when the boy was genuinely worried. You could almost hear a shift in Pidge's voice on the other line, changing from something pissy to something genuine.

"Wait, what's going on? Are you okay?"

"It's Keith. He ran away."

Another pause. "...you lost him?"

Lance didn't bother wasting time. "I fucked up. He left and my family are out looking for him. I have no idea where he is."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah."

"I know you want to find him," Pidge began, their voice cautious. "But maybe he doesn't want to be found? He probably left for a reason, Lance."

Instead of automatically replying, Lance forced his bottom lip beneath his teeth, biting it so hard that something metallic tainted his tongue.

Of course he left for a reason. That reason was Lance. Lance was the one who messed it up, Lance fucked up their relationship, Lance broke Keith's heart. It wasn't a matter of wondering what Keith wanted - Lance knew. Keith was angry with him, and probably wanted to be alone. That, however, did not mean being alone was a *good idea* - especially on Christmas Day with no shoes or a wallet.

"He did leave for a reason; It was me. I'm trying to fix it. I just don't know how."

"Maybe apologize? How hard could it be?"

Lance almost laughed at that. "He loves me, Pidge. And I think -"

The thought of admitting it to himself was one thing, but to say it outloud? That was an entire other monster of anxiety, just feasting on Lance's nerves. It had taken Lance so long to reach this point, to

become this aware, to understand this much. He couldn't back out now out of fear.

"I think I love him too."

Pidge was silent, but Lance could imagine the side of their brown eyes.

"I love him," Lance repeated, voice shaking into the phone. "Or it least, I think I will. Someday. I have the potential to."

Pidge was fully out of bed now - Lance could already hear the rustle of blankets and the clack of laptop keys.

"I'm gonna find his location by tracing a phone call from your phone to his. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, I've already called him several times tonight."

"Alright, I'll figure this out."

"Thank you *so much*."

There was more rattling of a keyboard, and Lance realized he'd been put on speaker phone. "You're welcome. And, uh, Lance?"

"Yeah?"

Pidge was quiet for a moment. Their fingers smacking against the keys was the only source of sound tying them together.

"I'm proud of you. I'm so insanely proud of you."

Pidge hung up after that - they were never one to dwindle. Lance just smiled, promising himself that he'd give Pidge the biggest hug when he returned to Oregon.

It took around fifteen minutes, but Lance finally received Keith's location in the form of a text message from Pidge, followed by a meme of the frosted flakes mascot saying 'Go get 'em tiger'.

The location was a McDonald's restaurant - one only a few towns away. They could arrive in less than an hour. As they drove, Lance poured himself into reading the letter again. And again. And again, up until the point he couldn't anymore. His eyes were strained, his mind was tired. It was the letter - the things it said, the words

written - they were too important. Lance wanted to memorize them, imprint them in his mind. Every section was important, even the last one - it had Lance smiling the most.

So. Will you go on a date with me?

Please?

Yes:

No:

A smile grew as an idea formed in Lance's head, brightening his face even in the darkly lit car.

"Hey Mom," Lance began, all as he flattened the piece of paper over his knee. "Do you possibly have a pen in your purse?"

Day 10

Sunday, December 25th

Christmas Day

5:02 A.M.

They finally found Daniel's stolen minivan. It sat parked outfront a small McDonalds - just as Pidge said it would. However, the car was empty and locked, no remnants of Keith to be found.

Sophia turned around in the front seat, bags hanging beneath her tired eyes. "Alright," She bellowed, clapping her hands together. "What's the gameplan?"

It was obvious Benji had been planning this, because he was the first to speak. All wide eyes and enthusiastic cheeks, Benji spoke loudly. "Mom, you'll go in first. Keith is probably super torn up and heart broken; sending in Lance first would only fuck him up more."

"Language," Rosa chided. She sat up straight, pulling on her windbreaker and wrapping herself in a scarf.

"Sorry," Benji mumbled, before continuing. "Once Mamá enters she'll use her mom mojo. The mom moji is a very important factor - it'll soften Keith up. He'll agree to see Lance, and then we send the bad boy in. He'll reveal his feelings and they'll have a gay makeout;

hence a great happily ever after. Alright? Good game plan?"

Lance rolled his eyes in agreement, gripping tightly to the folded letter like it was the only thing keeping his beating heart steady. "Yeah, yeah, good game plan. Let's just get it over with."

Once the decision was made and deemed final, Rosa opened the passenger door. It opened the car's interior to a heavy wind, the cold weather whipping at Rosa's hair like ropes. She'd let it down, too frantic to worry about pulling it into her signature bun.

"Alright," She called over the heavy weather, giving her children a small wave. "No raging parties while I'm gone. Okay?"

The kids only laughed, Benji ushering his mom forward. "Go get him, Mamá. Give him a kiss for me!"

Keith couldn't believe he'd forgotten his wallet.

He knew exactly where it was too - sitting on Lance's bedside table. A table that was in a room, a room that was in a house, a house that was four cities away.

He'd only had enough change in his pocket to buy a small fry - all in quarters and nickels no less. The small package of food was almost gone too; the very last one still lay resting in a pile of ketchup.

Keith sighed, stuffing the last fry into his mouth. What he wouldn't give for a milkshake.

His stomach growled, reminding him of every mistake he'd made. For the last couple hours Keith had done nothing but switch between modes: panic and anger. One moment he was terrified, the realization of how broke, how alone, and how out of gas he was. All he had was his phone, and he didn't dare call - or answer - anyone.

However, the next moment would come and Keith would be furious. He'd sit in his booth at the back of McDonalds and just stare, counting the number of tiles that lined the ceiling. For every tile there was he'd name off something he hated - each one letting him savor in the rage. The mental list had reached one hundred and nine so far, and he found it still going strong.

I hate Lance's freckles.

I hate Lance's stupid love of chickens.

I hate that he sleeps shirtless.

I hate Mateo's giggle.

I hate that Cleo could be the best sister ever.

I hate that Sophia rocks mom world.

I hate that Rosa rocks mom world even more.

I hate that Josie braids my hair and is super good at it.

I hate that Benji can make me laugh.

I hate that-

Suddenly, as if a wall had moved before him, Keith found something block his line of sight. He scowled, shifting in his seat to look at the intruder.

Keith never thought he'd be more happy to see someone's face.

It was tired, strained. The laugh lines on her cheeks were far more prominent with lack of sleep, additionally promoting the bags under her eyes. Her normal bun was gone, long black hair falling over her shoulders like a curtain. She held a milkshake in her hand; it was McDonald's signature Christmas candy cane blend.

"Merry Christmas," Rosa whispered, holding the ice cream beverage out to him.

He wanted to smile; the urge to do so was painful. Rosa had that effect on him.

"How'd you know I needed a milkshake?"

A pause. "Let's call it Mother's instinct."

Just as he reached a hand up to grab the drink, something twinkled in her eye. It was a playful, dastardly, an almost diabolical side of her; a remnant of the look Josie wore everyday. Like lightning, she moved the drink from his grasp and took a long slurp from the straw.

Keith's mouth dropped in shock, only making her giggle.

"Sorry," She cried sweetly, setting the drink back into Keith's hands.

"I had to make sure it wasn't poisoned."

It was then that Keith couldn't contain it.

Rosa. It was because of Rosa. She was so unlike any other person he'd ever met; no wonder Lance loved her. No wonder Lance rambled on about her when they were supposed to study, no wonder he insisted on skipping her from college at least once a week.

Keith's love for the woman was so indescribable - It didn't make any sense. He thought he understood love now that he'd written that awful, terrible letter to Lance. But no, love continued to surprise him, tugging at a brand new heartstring each time. Here was this woman whom he had no relation to - and he loved her. It was the definition of something unconditional, so vibrantly vivid in his mind that he swore he could reach out and touch it.

So he began to cry. It was this strange joke she'd just pulled - it made him sob, tears falling with no sign to stop. Keith never had a mom to play with, never a mother to check his drinks for poison. Even if she was pretending, it was so sentimental, so entirely instinctual that it made Keith's heart *ache*.

"Keith," She cried, suddenly setting the milkshake onto the table. She sat down next to Keith and pulled him into her arms, letting his head fall against her chest. "What's wrong? Why are you crying?"

Keith could barely speak, the sobs were coming out too fast and too strong to control them. Instead he let them fall, burying his head against Rosa's collarbone where several tear stains had accumulated. She showed no sign of even caring, instead stroking at the boy's hair lovingly.

"Shh," Rosa cooed, trailing her fingers down Keith's hairline. "It's okay. It's okay to cry."

Even though Keith had never done this before, he decided that he loved it.

A mother's hug. Keith remembered Rosa telling him that you were you never too old to cuddle with your mother. It was a unique right that all Sanchez children were deemed at birth. She claimed to still cuddle Lance, as the two would lay on the couch and just sit, both talking, giggling, telling each other stories of their day. Keith had never experienced such a thing - until now, cuddled into Rosa's

arms at the back of a fast food restaurant.

How fortunate he was. Keith had been blessed with something so rare, something so inimitable that he feared any unnecessary movement might destroy it.

Keith's tears finally calmed down after a few more minutes, and as they dried away Keith finally moved from Rosa's arms. However, Rosa refused to let go of his hands, squeezing them tightly. Keith loved them, they were warm and wrinkled, marked with signs of her life's hard work.

After a moment of pleasant silence, Keith finally spoke.

"I'm so sorry, Rosa."

The look that plastered Rosa's face wasn't what Keith expected. It was affectionate; held with a foreign sense of devotion that Keith didn't recognize.

"Mi Niño," She whispered, lips trembling. "Do not be sorry. You have done nothing wrong."

Keith swallowed, lowering his head in shame. "But I did. I ruined your family dinner. I lied to you, I lied to the entire family. I abused your hospitality and," He swallowed, A curtain of dark hair trailed in front of his face, blocking his eyes and nose from view. "I'm sorry."

Rosa didn't speak, instead placing a hand at Keith's cheek. It was such an affectionate, peculiar act - Keith wondered what it meant.

"If you are sorry," She whispered, never moving her hand away. "Then I am sorry too."

Keith shifted his eyes up, and he gasped.

She was crying too - just as he had.

To see someone like Rosa cry can be described as nothing short of extraordinary. It is the same feeling Lance felt when he first saw his father cry - it is surreal. For Lance to see someone like Rosa - a strong, intelligent, independent woman - cry like this? It was beyond perplexing, an emotion that makes you question tears and the standards society holds them under.

"Why are you crying?" Keith whispered, tempted to reach for her face just as she had done for him. "Why are you sorry?"

"Because," She began, wiping at the tears with the back of her hand. "You are so important, and there hasn't been many people to tell you that. Life has dealt you a great many cards; I only wish I could've been there to help you not feel so alone."

Keith was confused, disoriented. What had brought this on? Why had Rosa chosen to say these things?

"I don't understand," Keith whispered, his voice shaky.

Rosa finally wiped away all the tears, deciding to sit up straighter. "I found my christmas present," She explained softly. "And I read the letter inside."

This made Keith's eyes light up, realization hitting him sharply.
"You mean-"

"The letter? And the book?" She nodded. "I found them. We all looked through your things in a frenzy after you left - sorry about that." She chuckled, reaching into the hollow of her leather purse. Both hands disappeared into the never ending pit, only to return with yellow book in hand.

"I read some of the story on the car ride while looking for you." She trailed a finger over the spine lovingly, her eyes so warm.
"However, the letter - the one you wrote to me - I finished that."

Keith blushed, his eyes immediately shifting away.

The letter had been a spur of the moment choice. He had intended for the letter to be read after he was long gone - not to be confronted on the matter within the confinements of a diner booth.

"The envelope said to not open until Lance and I broke up," Keith stated, pink lightening his cheeks. "I didn't think you'd read it already."

Rosa chuckled, reaching out to pat Keith's hands softly. "Well, after you two revealed yourselves as simple friends, I felt that reading it would be appropriate."

Keith blushed even deeper, wanting so badly to look away. Rosa's smile was the only thing comforting his anxieties, and he felt

warmth under her gaze.

The letter was, if anything, a revelation. It wasn't like Lance's letter - not even close. While the love letter had been filled with his feelings and expression, it was Rosa's letter that described Keith's past in simple terms. It wasn't detailed, it wasn't dynamic. It was short and sweet; beginning and ending in Keith's terrible ink handwriting.

Rosa,

By the time you read this letter, I will have been gone. That's what persuaded me to write this - I knew I'd never see you again.

Lance and I faked the relationship. Please do not be angry with him, as it was something we both agreed on. All he wanted was to please you. I get the feeling, however, that if he were to please the entire family, he would've brought a girl home. I am not a girl, and not everyone can be pleased. This includes Lance. He brought home a boy not to rebel against you or Jaime, and also not to push his sexuality, but because this is a part of him. It was to please the requests of himself .

Another thing that persuaded me to write this letter was knowing that I could reveal my emotions without the worry of a potential confrontation. Since I will never see you again, revealing my thoughts only felt fitting.

I was a foster child - Lance informed you of this. I was also a troubled kid, as I often got too angry, too frustrated, too annoyed. I grew up without the guidance a parental figure can give - as I often pushed away my foster parents or didn't know how to communicate my need for affection. I don't want to get into specifics of my life or the trials I went through - but know this. There was only one thing that ever made me feel worthy of love - and that was this book. I hope you'll read it with that piece of knowledge at the back of your mind. It's been a comfort during times when I had no one, it's brought me a sense of love I'd never experienced before.

I know I'm only your son's friend, and I know we'll never see each other again, but I just want you to know - you're the first person to ever make me feel the same way this book did. I think that's why I decided to give you a copy. The story is important, and to me it doesn't feel much different from my own life. You helped complete that story.

Thank you. For everything.

-Keith

Keith looked up from the letter, as Rosa had handed it to him to read one last time between the two of them, neither awkward nor comfortable.

"There's this line in the book," Rosa began softly, a thoughtful look on her face. "Which I'm sure you must know by heart."

Keith bit his lip, nodding as she was most likely correct. "Is it the honey bee one?"

Rosa nodded, opening the book as she searched for the correct page. Once she found it she began to read aloud, her voice smooth yet soothing to the ear.

"Don't be afraid, as no life-loving bee wants to sting you. Still, don't be an idiot; wear long sleeves and long pants. Don't swat. Don't even think about swatting. If you feel angry, whistle. Anger agitates, while whistling melts a bee's temper. Act like you know what you're doing, even if you don't. Above all, send the bees love. Every little thing wants to be loved."

She sighed, contently closing the book.

"Remember that, Keith. *Every little thing wants to be loved.* Even you."

Keith nodded, fearing that he might start to cry all over again.

"Now," Rosa began, standing up. "Drink your milkshake. I'm sending my boy in. Be nice to him."

Keith suddenly paled, his throat shrinking size. "Wait - you're sending in Lance?"

"Hell yeah I am. That boy probably read that letter of yours over six times tonight. Soon or later he'll tattoo it to his left buttcheek." She laughed heartily at that, all as she softly placed the novel back into her purse. "Anyway, as my job as his mother, I will *definitely* be preventing that from happening. So you're gonna talk to him. My orders."

"But-"

She pointed to the milkshake. "Drink."

Keith couldn't help it, he simply nodded his head, moving to take a sip. Candy cane and vanilla stuck to the roof of his mouth,

immediately warming up his belly in a way he'd been yearning for just an hour earlier.

Once Rosa disappeared from the restaurant, Keith couldn't help but feel angry again. He didn't *want* to see Lance. He was angry at Lance, infuriated, irritated. He didn't want to see the boy, never mind *talk to him*.

A jingle of a door opening sounded to Keith's left, though he refused to look up. Footsteps moved from the door, shifting closer and closer. Keith clenched his hands around the milkshake, suddenly *very* interested in the diner table and the stains that decorated it. The figure sat in front of him, legs stretched out beneath the table. They bumped against Keith's knees, though he refused to look up.

"Sorry," the figure muttured. "Long legs."

Keith couldn't help it; he snuck a peek.

It was Lance; though that much was obvious. He looked tired, eyes heavy and drooping, with a windbreaker wrapped around his body. He looked cold, shivering despite the heater above them.

Keith couldn't help but say it.

"I hate you."

The words left Keith's lips before he even knew what he was were urgent and unplanned, doing nothing to ease the tension.

Lance sighed. "I know you do."

Keith didn't hate Lance. He may have *wanted* to hate Lance, he may have *wished* he could. Except he didn't, and that was the reality. He didn't hate Lance, and those three little words? *I hate you?* What Keith really meant was the complete opposite. He was defeated, completely lost in Lance's tired eyes, the dirt smudged under his jaw, the frantic pile of hair on his head. It was like bed head but worse - a product of the car ride over.

It was evident how petrified Lance was; his knuckles were turning white from their grip on the table's edge. There were a thousand things he wanted to say, *needed* to say, and here they were: nothing was being said.

"Why are you here?" Keith finally asked, observing Lance's face for

what he could only guess was trepidation. "What do you want?"

Lance blinked, moving his hands away from the table to rest in his lap.

"I want to explain myself," Lance mumbled, his words barely audible. "But I hope..." His voice trailed off into silence, and Keith looked at Lance questioningly.

"You hope? Hope what?"

Lance squared his jaw. "I hope you'll at least listen."

Did Keith want to listen? No. He didn't want to hear excuses, no justifications, no reasons for the things Lance had done. He wanted an apology - a genuine, sincere one. So he simply stared, leaning his head against the back of his McDonald's booth.

"Fine. I'll try."

Lance rubbed at his lip, looking down at the cracks in the linoleum table.

"First of all," Lance began, obviously hesitant. "I'm sorry, and I want you to know that I'm a dick."

Keith snorted, and it was out of spite. "I don't need you to tell me what I already know."

A scowl darkened Lance's chin. "*Obviously*. I'm just pointing out that I acknowledge it. I'm a dick, and I'm showing to you that I agree."

"So you acknowledge that you're a dick, and this is your way of admitting it?"

"Yes."

"This is your apology?"

"..yes?"

Keith closed his eyes and banged the back of his head against the booth, feeling the sharp sting of impact brush his skull. This apology was everything Keith *didn't* want. He wanted Lance to be on his knees, he wanted Lance crying, he wanted Lance to be *really*,

truly, entirely regretful. Keith deserved that much.

"It's not very good," Keith commented.

"But I *am* sorry," Lance bellowed, moving in closer. "I just, I don't know," He paused, biting his lips. "I don't know how to show it. But I am."

Keith peered at Lance, observing his face for any signs of truth.

"Why? Why are you sorry?"

Lance wanted to say something, but nothing seemed to leave his lips. It was discouraging for both boys to have silence, to have nothing to fill the gaps.

"I should've figured," Keith muttered, wrenching himself from the booth. He was done. Keith was finished with Lance's sore excuse for an apology. "I'm leaving."

As Keith began walking away from the booth, his back to both Lance and the candy cane milkshake, a song began to play. It was quiet, the volume playing low from a cellphone. It was out of the ordinary - enough that it persuaded Keith to turn around and stare. He recognised the tune, the name just barely on the tip of his tongue. It sounded like something from the seventies - and fear immediately trickled its way in.

Was this... was he trying to apologize through song?

It wasn't until Lance stood up and threw him a large, shit-eating grin that Keith *understood*.

Lance began to move; iphone in hand, hips rolling, words to the song falling off his lips. It was both terrible and wonderful at the same time; terrible for the song choice, wonderful because it was *tacky*.

And Keith loved it.

"Spending all my nights, all my money going out on the town. Doing anything just to get you off my mind."

Keith was cringing, especially with the way Lance was singing. It was off key, it was humiliating, and it was completely adorable. A part of Keith wanted to slap Lance for it. The other part of him was,

if anything, finding it completely charming.

*"But when the morning comes, I'm right back where I started again.
Trying to forget you is just a waste of time-*"

"Oh my god," Keith cried, finding his body move towards Lance without his mind's consent. He was under Lance's spell; the hypnotism of his legs, the twist of his torso. Keith couldn't help but move closer; even as Lance flicked his hips *just right*.

Lance shouted the chorus - it was mortifying.

"BABY COME BACK!"

Keith moved his hands to cover his face, peeking through the gaps of his fingers just to watch.

"Any kind of fool could see!"

Keith groaned, doing a terrible job at hiding his embarrassment. He was *supposed to be angry*. He was supposed to be mad - not trying to suppress giggles.

"Please stop," Keith mumbled into his hands, though there was no warning to his voice. He was just laughing now - tears were forming at the crease of his eyelids.

"Baby come back! You can blame it all on me!"

"You are the biggest meme," Keith cried, the blush of his skin so warm that it had traveled to his ears.

"I was wrong, and I just can't live without you!"

The night shift McDonalds workers chuckled from their places behind the front counter, each one watching as Lance did a one-eighty twist. He wasn't just dancing for Keith - he was dancing for *them*. He was embarrassing himself, he was the fool, and he knew it too. This was Lance's apology, and Keith couldn't help but accept it.

Only a truly regretful boy would dance in a McDonald's for his lover.

"Okay. Okay, okay stop-" Keith giggled, reaching for the phone with an open hand. Lance just maneuvered around him, spinning on one leg. He shook his head and smiled, instead grabbing Keith's hand.

He continued to dance, shaking his hips in place. "I'm serious when I say that I'm sorry." He spoke over the music, continuously working his body in circles. "I fucked up, and you didn't deserve it. You're worth more than that- you're worth everything."

Keith's breath shifted, his hands slowly lowering.

"I-"

Lance gripped Keith's hands, holding them close to his chest. "I hope you'll forgive me. I *want* you to forgive me, Keith, because I don't want to lose you."

Keith didn't even take the time to contemplate his answer.

Lance was sorry, that much was obvious. The thing with Lance was this: he wasn't very good at giving apologies. That didn't mean he never felt regret, no, he felt enough regret to last a lifetime. Lance knew how to apologize too - it was more that he was scared. He was fearful, afraid of rejection, and too confused, too worried about the other's emotions. This sort of apology - the kind with song, dance, humiliation, laughter- this was his way of doing it.

Keith nodded his head.

"Yes. I forgive you."

He paused, lips quirked up. "Now stop dancing-" He turned and motioned to the restaurant workers. "We have an audience."

Lance's grin turned wicked.

"Well, in that case-"

Keith squealed, watching in horror as Lance began to kneel on the ground. Gasps from the McDonalds workers echoed in the background, one woman even happily slapping her coworker against the chest from her hysteria.

Lance looked up at Keith with round, watery eyes. "Will you," He began, suddenly reaching for something in his pocket.

Keith's heart pounded - he was begging, *begging* Lance to not do it. He was confused, baffled. Keith was against everything this situation lead up to-

Suddenly, staring right in front of him, was his letter. It had been folded into squares, only to be unfolded several more times. It was worn with use, the pencil marks smudging the paper. Lance had opened it, letting the letter float in his hand.

Keith let out a breath.

"Will you go on a date with me?"

It was then that Keith looked closer at the letter. At the very bottom, next to the words 'Yes' was a mark, one done in red ink over an unsteady surface.

So. Will you go on a date with me?

Please?

Yes: X

No:

Keith should've guessed that Lance was a romantic - this boy was going to give him cavities. Affection; Lance wore so much of it. It was love, fondness, adoration, devotion - he wore each and every one. It was sewn between his freckles, it dripped from the tips of his eyelashes.

"Yes," Keith whispered, removing his hands slowly. "I'll go on a date with you."

Then, with a face so beyond dastardly, Lance swept his arms beneath Keith's hips and hoisted him up. Keith gave a scream, giggling even more when his legs wrapped around the base of Lance's knees. He snaked his arms to hang around Lance's neck, playfully tugging at the long ends of brunet hair Lance was too lazy to trim.

"I'm so sorry," Lance whispered, his voice suddenly heavy. "I'm so sorry. I don't think you understand how sorry I am. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry-"

"Stop saying sorry," Keith whispered, leaning his lips in. "I know you are."

"So you do forgive me? For real?"

"I didn't know if I could. At least - not until you came back."

"So you do?" Lance moved his forehead against Keith's, lips quivering. "Really? Like, really really?"

"I already said it. I forgive you."

A pause.

"So I can kiss you?"

The biggest, toothiest smile decorated Keith's jaw, spreading out to display little dimples.

"I was afraid you were too chicken to even ask-"

Lance pressed his mouth against Keith's lips, squeezing him even closer to his chest. He laughed into Keith's mouth - it tickled, warming him up.

The kiss tasted of candy cane and vanilla ice cream. Tongues trailed the inside of cheeks, hands pulled at hair, fingers roamed a little too risque for the comfort of a public McDonalds. Their shaking hands traced each outline, each mark, each curve - only breaking apart for a moment. Lance moved his lips from Keith's mouth to his nose, to his eyes, to his cheeks, to his chin - it made Keith snicker uncontrollably as Lance placed a soft kiss against each one.

Lance and Keith forgot about Christmas. They forgot that it was almost six in the morning, forgot about their lack of sleep and tired eyes. They didn't dare remember about the car full of family members parked out front, or the amount of chaos they'd return to. They ignored the restaurant, the kitchen full of coworkers just watching them. They even forgot the choices they'd made, and the stupid mistakes written down on a list. Instead they cherished it, adoring the moment for what it was.

As time would tell, there would be more kisses. A peck to the ear; a kiss to the jaw. There would be smooches over Keith's belly fat - kisses that would make him squirm from the tickling. Keith would caress each of Lance's freckles - even the ones on his arms, his back, his palms. Each kiss would be appreciated, savored, loved.

It wasn't a lie anymore.

These kisses were real.

Day 10

Sunday, December 25th

Christmas Day

3:15 P.M.

Keith felt content.

It was a simple, immovable feeling; a sort of delight that fills you from the tips of your toes to the ends of your hair. He lay on the couch with Lance's arms wrapped around his torso, his back cuddled against Lance's chest. It was warm, so sweet that teeth could rot, and all Keith could think was how *happy he was*.

The house was quiet - the first time in days. Most family members had chosen to take afternoon naps, Jaime and Rosa included. The only ones awake were the children and their cousins, all preoccupied as they played somewhere upstairs.

The living room was in disarray - present wrappings and leftover breakfast littered the floor from that morning. The family had attended Christmas day mass after the presents (against both Lance and Benji's protests) and had all arrived home exhausted, worn out, and ready for bed.

"I don't want to attend Mass ever again," Lance whined into Keith's hair, his eyes fluttered closed and arm dangled lazily over Keith's torso.

They were tired - the both of them - and each debated taking naps of their own. Keith's Sunday tie dangled from his fingers, trailing across the floor. It was one of Benji's old ties, a red and green striped one that he'd felt *ridiculous* wearing in public.

"Then don't," Keith countered, turning around in Lance's arms so that their noses bumped against each other. "Just rebel."

Lance reveled in Keith's smile. It was the flush of his cheeks, the wrinkle of his nose, the snicker under his breath - those things were what motivated him to do more than just cuddle on a couch. Lance wanted more than just a simple kiss, he wanted to place not one, not two, but *thousands* of kisses against Keith's lips.

"Maybe I will," Lance hummed, opening his eyes and rubbing his

nose even farther in. "Or maybe I'll just kiss you."

Keith trailed a finger over Lance's bottom lip, their bodies pressed so entirely close that it made Keith ache. "Is that a threat?" Keith whispered - all mischievous eyes and a crooked smile.

Lance needed no more prodding; it was obvious what Keith wanted. Lance was kissing Keith in an instant, their lips pressed together warm and wet. It began cautious - a languid, agonizingly slow movement of the lips. Keith wanted more, *needed* more, and in a single moment he was shifting from their idle kissing to something heated, something ardent. Keith loved it; the feel of Lance's chest under his palms, the quiet groan Lance gave when Keith bit his lip. Their position shifted drastically, Keith suddenly crawling to straddle Lance's hips. Lance only rolled his pelvis up, making Keith gasp.

"You-" Keith sighed into Lance's mouth, his hand suddenly tugging at the buttons of Lance's shirt. "Are-" He continued to unbutton them, each one just another barrier. "Really-" He reached the last one, all before shrugging the dress shirt from Lance's shoulders. "- Hot."

Lance immediately pulled away, Keith's words hung in the air. Keith whined in protest, reaching out blindly for Lance's lips, only to find none.

Keith opened his eyes, already annoyed, only to see Lance's impish grin.

"What was that?" Lance questioned, all innocent and pure. "I didn't quite catch that."

All amount of sexual desire Keith *might've held* suddenly dispersed. He scowled, suddenly sitting up straight over Lance's torso.

"Are you kidding me?" Keith grumbled, his hands splayed across Lance's bare chest. "You seriously just-"

"Yup. Tell me again, I don't think I heard you."

"No."

Lance wore a taunting, cheeky smile. "Tell me again."

Keith scowled, wanting more than anything to go *back* to what they

were doing. Whatever happened to the sex driven man he'd been straddling mere moments ago?

Keith blew a hair out of his face. "Fine. If I say it again will you be satisfied?"

Lance chuckled. "*Maybe.*"

Keith groaned loudly, his protests probably audible in the other room. There was no way they could go back now, and Keith simply rolled from Lance's chest and onto the floor.

"You're insufferable."

"Wait—" Lance suddenly perked up, now alone on the couch. He looked lonely, eyes wide and lip puckered out. "You're not gonna follow through? You aren't gonna say it?"

Keith shook his head, feeling rather malicious at foiling Lance's master plan. "Nope. I only said it once - never again."

"But why!" Lance whined, sitting up flopping his hands down like a child. "You're so mean."

Keith just snickered, then pulling out his phone and scrolling through social media, his interest in other places.

"Can't we just, I don't know, go back to what we were—"

"Nope." Keith looked up from his phone and smirked, shaking his head. "You ruined it. All your fault."

Keith *should* have felt guilty for leaving his makeout partner hanging like that, but Keith couldn't help but feel that Lance deserved it. The boy was a tease, and sometimes that got the better of him.

A few minutes passed, and it was during these few minutes that Lance spent his time pouting. Keith refused to move nor satisfy Lance, instead scrolling through twitter with a smirk on his chin. As the time ticked on, Keith wondered just how long Lance could survive without saying anything. The boy would need contact eventually.

After a while, Keith couldn't help but take a peek at Lance from the corner of his eyelid. The boy was - miraculously - not pouting, and

instead had chosen to stare at Keith strangely. It was such an un-Lance-like face, an expression he didn't wear often. Keith could only name a few times ever seeing such a face - that morning in the McDonalds being one of those times. It was a simple look; his lips quirked into a crooked line, eyes half lidded and heavy, cheeks flushed with red. It made Keith feel warm inside, like Lance was trying to memorize every curve of Keith's face.

"What are you looking at?" Keith questioned, curiosity getting the better of him

"Nothing," Lance confessed shortly, the face suddenly disintegrating. He looked away, standing up and reaching into his pile of presents.

Keith didn't say anything, all for fear that he might break the silence. Lance continued to rummage through his gifts, even tossing some of the unneeded presents onto the couch behind him.

Lance finally found what he was looking for, popping up with Keith's mixtape in hand. It was the same as Keith remembered it, even if the CD's sharpie ink had been smudged from use. Lance held it up triumphantly, bringing it with him as he walked towards the radio.

"Are you freaking kidding me," Keith observed, watching as Lance popped the mixtape into the radio's CD port. "You better not make me dance."

"I sure will," Lance countered as he skipped through several song in search of something specific.

"To my very own mixtape, even! Do you know how cringy that is?"

"I do , " Lance stated, his finger hovering over the play button. "Which is why I'm proclaiming a new law: Always dance with Lance to mixtapes."

Keith folded his arms over his chest, keeping his feet grounded to the floor. "The songs on that playlist are terrible. I should know - I compiled them."

Lance hit play and ignored Keith's protests. The radio gave off a low buzz as it warmed up, allowing Lance enough time to slip across the room and into Keith's arms.

"It'll be fine," Lance assured, grabbing onto Keith's hands. "This song

is one of my favorites."

"Is this torture for not calling you hot a second time?"

Lance tapped a finger to his chin as if contemplating the notion, before nodding his head in agreement. "Possibly."

Keith rolled his eyes, instead letting Lance take control. Lance was always that way when they danced - he knew exactly what was needed and he knew exactly when to do it. Their hands situated after a few failed attempts, and Keith let himself fall against Lance's chest. The boy was still shirtless, but Keith didn't mind. He secretly enjoyed it, letting his fingers trail over the bare skin.

The song began, its tune automatically familiar to Keith. He remembered picking it out for the mixtape - it had been a very specific choice. *Stand by Me* the song said, it's words more than just lyrics to a page. They were genuine, a set of lines that Keith hoped would mean something sentimental for Lance, just as they had for Keith.

Apparently, they had. Lance had become tender, moving their bodies in a circular motion about the living room. There was barely any space between them, Keith's head resting against his dance partner's shoulder.

"When the night has come, and the land is dark, and the moon is the only light we'll see."

Keith thought back to just a few nights ago - the first night they danced. They'd been in the Sanchez family kitchen, socked feet carrying them over tiled floors. Neither of the boys had recognised the significance a moment like that held; it was their first dance. Neither had known just how many dances would come. There would be slow and fast ones, intimate ones and intense ones - dances made in the dark of night, dances in the light of day. No matter what type of song, each dance was going to be *theirs*.

"No I won't be afraid, Oh, I won't be afraid, Just as long as you stand, stand by me."

Lance began to hum the chorus, the noise an echo of Ben E. King's words. Keith could feel it in his chest, the vibration thumping against his rib cage. They moved steady, neither one in a hurry to get anywhere. It was just Lance and him, both enveloped in each other's arms and fingers.

*"So darling, darling stand by me, oh stand by me, oh stand, stand by me,
Stand by me."*

This was what made it all worth it. The dance, the movement about the room, the words the song proclaimed - every painful moment was worth *this*. Everything Keith had learned in Arizona was a blessing - he didn't regret a thing.

Keith feared that if he blinked, everything would disappear. There would be no Mateo to play with, no Josie to braid his hair. Cleo would be gone, and Keith would never see the girl catch her dreams - big ones for such a small, strong girl. Rachel and Daniel would be gone, their little Isabella no longer able to tug at Keith's ponytail or blow bubbles.

Rosa would have never hugged Keith in that McDonald's. He would've never learned about family or the importance it carries; never been able to ask Rosa for a hug and actually receive one.

And Lance. There would be no Lance to fight with, no Lance to kiss, no Lance to tickle and squeeze and fumble over.

Keith didn't want to blink. He wanted it all to stay in his life - forever. Keith didn't want to go back to University; it was there that he had nothing. No Rosa to hold him, no family to call his own.

It was then, as Keith spun in Lance's arms, that he made the decision.

He was never going to let the Sanchez family go.

If the sky that we look upon

Should tumble and fall

Or the mountain should crumble to the sea

I won't cry, I won't cry

No, I won't shed a tear

Just as long as you stand, stand by me.

End.